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YOST TOOK THE BIRD CAUTIOUSLY, HOLDING IT AT ARM'S LENGTH. "VAT YOU CALL HIM?" HE SAID.

Black Hills Ben;

OR,

Dutch Jan on the War-path.

BY MAJOR LEWIS W. CARSON.

CHAPTER I.

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY.

"WAKE up, man! The bears will be after you before you know it."

The speaker was stooping by the side of a rapid stream, shaking by the shoulder a man who lay there asleep. The person who spoke was a young fellow in a hunting garb, with a rifle in his hand and a knife in his belt. His frame was strong and well made, his face manly, and his general appearance prepossessing. The man at his feet, who did not wake even when the hand was laid upon his shoulder, was one of whose nationality there could be no doubt. He was a Dutchman, having the marked characteristics of his people. He had a rather good-looking, indolent face, and as his eyes at last opened lazily, as the other shook him roughly, considerable cunning was displayed in their depths.

"Vy you shakes me, den?" demanded the sleeper in an injured tone. "I nefer done nottings mit you."

"Wake up, then."

"Vake oop! vake oop! Vy shall I vake oop, unless I wants to? Now, see here; you coes away now—right now, vile I dalks mit you. S'pose you no go away yoost now, I vill get oop unt preak your het mit mine goon."

"Oh, no," said the young hunter, laughing. "I don't want to quarrel. But you are not safe here. I should really dislike very much to see a nice, good-looking fellow like you gobbled by a grizzly bear. Don't take any chances on sleeping out in this way, without a guard."

"A crizzly pear! Vat is dat?" demanded the Dutchman.

"That is one of the most savage animals on the face of the earth," was the reply. "The strength of a man is nothing when once he falls into his hug. Strong! That is not the word. Nothing can describe his strength and ferocity."

"I dinks I don't vant nottings to do mit crizzly pears," said the Dutchman, rising. "Vell, who are you, anyvay?"

"My name is Daniel Crowley," replied the young man.

"Vat you do?"

"I am out on a hunt in company with a party of trappers and guides. Will you join us?"

"Vell, I don't care. I cooms away from St. Shoseph, in Missouri, pecause efery von is so particular off a man don't bay somet'ings mit de Government efery dimes he sells a class of lager."

"Then it appears that matters not unconnected with the excise question sent you out on the plains?"

"Yaw; I vas mat mit eferypoty, unt so I gets my gun unt dinks I vill co mit Californy. Vas it a good vay off, you dinks?"

"A good way! I should think so; a trail a

thousand miles long, through the desert and prairie, haunted by Indians who do not know what mercy means. What is your name?"

"Yost Hoppen."

"A good handle that. But come with me. You are well armed, add a few weeks' hunting and fishing will do you good. And when we go back to St. Louis, you can return to St. Joseph, and sell beer with more regard to the excise law."

"Yaw," said Yost. "But, shoost look at dis—ven a man drinks lager peer he drinks him for his own bleasure, eh?"

"Certainly."

"Vell, den, vat bleasure is dere in drinking peer ven you can't drink it unless some Common Council or udder say you may? Gootness cracious! it makes me so mat ash never vas, some dimes, ven I dinks how I've been dreated."

"Never mind that now, Hoppen. Out here you can drink little except the pure spring water, such as you rarely get in smoky and dusty cities. Beer, after all, does not satisfy thirst as good cool water does."

"Vater!" said the other, in a tone of intense disgust. "Yankees drink vater, unt don't care for peer!"

"A great many of them don't," replied Daniel.

"Den a creat many off dem are vools!" snorted the Dutchman. "Vat! not likes coot peer, vat foams from a parrel like snow, unt runs down the throat like oil, so creasy unt coot? Vy, I nefer sees how a man can lif mitout peer. I don't know how I does mitout it here."

"Now, I want to ask you a question, sir. Some people pretend to say that a man can't get drunk on lager beer. I never drank any, so—"

"Goot Lort!" ejaculated Yost.

"What is the matter?" said Crowley.

"Nefer trink any lager peer?" cried Yost.

"No."

"Nefer in all your life?"

"Not a glass."

"Den I vonders as you pe not deat; now vile I dalks mit you. Nefer trinks any lager peer in all his life! Gootness gracious! dat ish so funny!"

"I was going to ask you a question," said Crowley. "There are those who say that people cannot get drunk on the stuff they call lager beer; others say you can. What is your opinion?"

"Vat you call him—shtuff?"

"I beg pardon—the drink called lager."

"I dells you vat I dinks. Der is no delling off a man could not drown himself mit lager, yoost de same as he might do mit vater. Now den, lager is not made to swim in. Vater ish petter vor dat. Lager is made to trink. Off a man sits town unt trinks his deux or tri dozen classes off lager, it vill not hurt him. I nefer trinks more ash vorty mugs mineself."

"Is that all?" said Daniel, laughing.

"Dat ish not mooch. A man nefer ought to make a hog of himself."

"That is true," said Daniel, repressing a strong inclination to laugh. "Come along. We may as well go to camp."

Yost shouldered his rifle which had lain at his feet during the conversation, and followed the speaker.

The stream on which they stood ran through a beautiful prairie land, spread out before them like a great map. In the distance, the lofty peaks of the Black Hills could be seen. The prairie, in the hunting season, is one of the most remarkable sights ever seen by mortal eyes. Daniel Crowley was a lover of nature. His dark eyes rested approvingly upon the beautiful landscape, and he drew a long sigh of pleasure, and turned to his Dutch friend for sympathy. As he did so, he laughed outright at the expression of his face. He had been studying for some time on the wonder of a man who had lived to the age of twenty-five, and had never tasted the delectable drink called lager.

"Nefer trinks lager peer in his life! Goot cracious, vat a man!"

Crowley had his laugh out and then walked slowly away up the stream. He had not gone very far from the camp, and in fifteen minutes they entered it together. There were four men in all. Two of them were the ordinary trappers of the Northwest, clad in buckskins and moccasins. Another was a half-breed, a well-known guide over the hunting-grounds west of the Mississippi. A tall, nobly-formed man, with a keen, restless glance, showing the Indian blood in the elasticity and grace of every motion and in his swarthy skin. He wore the ordinary dress of a hunter and guide. Near him, whistling at a small piece of wood which lay in the hollow of his hand, and whistling in a loud key, sat an individual who was a character in his way. A sandy-haired, lank, lean-visaged fellow, in a greasy suit of buckskin, "tattered and torn," like the man in the old melody. He had a sharp, inquisitive eye, and a face nearly as dark as that of the half-breed, from constant exposure to the wind and sun of every locality. He cast a droll look at the Dutchman as he came up.

"What hev ye got thar, Dan?" demanded the greasy man. "I'll bet every cussed pelt I git this season he's a Dutchman."

"Keep quiet, Jeff Rooter," said Dan. "Don't meddle with my *protege*."

"Yer—which?" yelled Jeff. "Oh, good gracious! Git me an ear-trumpet, so thet I kin catch the sound of thet ar' word. Proto—ha! ha! ha! Oh, Dan, ye'll be the death of me."

"I'll give it to you right under the ear if you don't keep quiet. This man is going to join us. Use him well."

"Wait a minit, Mister City Man," said Jeff, suddenly assuming an expression of dignified anger. "What mou't thet last remark of yours signified? Say it ag'in, an' say it slow. Didn't I hear some remark 'bout givin' it to some one under the ear?"

"I think you did," said Dan. "This man is under my protection, and he shall not be troubled."

"That's a big word. Which ear mou't ye prefer, Mister Crowley?"

"Don't bother me, Jeff. You can't quarrel with me, if you keep your own side of the fence. But, if you get over on mine, it might

make a row. Now be civil. Don't mix yourself in with this man. I want him well used."

"Whose a-hurtin' of him; say?"

"Nobody," replied Dan. "And I propose to see nobody does."

"Oh! Ye'r' a sort o' gardeen of hisn. Now look hyar. I ain't a quarrelsome man, I ain't. But I can go through any man, big or lettle, old or young, the younger an' spryer the better I like it, thet goes to put on style over me. Yes, sirree, I ain't nothin' but a lettle cuss, but thet thing I kin do. Which way will ye hev it? Nip an' tuck, square hold, side hold, or with bare fists? Any way you like. So's yer suited, I ain't partic'lar."

"A truce, Jeff. You and I have no right to quarrel."

"Then let Dutchy take his own part," grumbled Jeff.

"Vat you mean by dat?" said Yost, who had been measuring him with his eye for some time. "Vat you want mit me?"

"For heaven's sake, don't talk to him now, Yost," said Dan. "Keep quiet."

"Let me spoke a few dimes mit him," said the Dutchman, quietly. "He spoke at me good many dimes, unt I no says not'ings. I'm not afraid mit him. He dalks too much mit his mout'."

"Keep back, every man of ye, while I thrash the ground with a Dutchman. Git out of the way, 'cause I don't want to spatter his blood an' bones an' brains all over yer good close. Now, Dutchy, hadn't ye better say yer pra'rs?"

"Vat for?" said Yost, who did not seem in the least frightened. "I nefer says my brayers mit t'e daytime. Vat ye goin' to do?"

"I'm goin' to wipe the ground with yer karkidge."

"Vat for?" asked the Teuton, in the same tone, his arms swinging lazily by his side.

"Vat I done mit you?"

"You've got to be 'nitiated," replied Jeff. "I'm the man to do it. Once pay yer entrance an' it's all right. But, the time has come. Git ready. I'm goin' to wrastle ye down."

Jeff rushed forward and fastened on the Dutchman by the shoulder and elbow. Yost never made a struggle, but stood like a rock, smiling calmly at the efforts to overthrow him on the part of the greasy hunter, Jeff got very red in the face.

"I'll wrastle ye down ef I die," he panted.

"Off you do, unt I find it ous, I vill t'row you over der moon," said Yost. Jeff Rooter tugged and strained without any perceptible effect on the equilibrium of the Dutchman.

"Go away," said the latter, getting weary of the sport. "You can't do nottings mit me. Dake away your hands."

"I'm goin' to throw ye, anyhow," said Jeff, continuing his struggles.

"I dells you vonce more, go away, v'en I dells you."

"I won't."

Yost put out his long arms and grasped the speaker by the shoulders. One effort of his powerful muscles, and the feet of Jeff flew into the air, and his body was deposited on the greensward ten feet away. He was on his feet in a moment and grappled his antagonist around

the waist. The first throw had been such a surprise to him that he did not have time to put forth the skill he really possessed in wrestling. He was now on his guard and had his favorite hold. The left arm of Yost was thrown about his neck, and his right hand grasped his wrist in an iron clasp. For five minutes they danced up and down upon the turf, and then, to the surprise and joy of every one, the heels of Jeff Rooter suddenly flew into the air, as he went over the hip of the Dutchman. Derisive yells greeted the fallen hero, as he rose slowly from the grass.

CHAPTER II.

THE GREAT AMERICAN PARTRIDGE.

JEFF was at first inclined to be angry. But, at the bottom of his bravado, there was a real admiration for a spirited act, and, before the laughter had subsided, he extended his hand and shook that of the Dutchman warmly.

"Thet's right, old man," he said. "I like a man with pluck, anyhow. Ye throwed me fa'r an' squar'. I don't say nothin' ag'in' it. Let's be friends."

"Shoost as you like," said Yost, returning the cordial pressure. "I nefer like to quarrel mit no mans. You pees very strong mit your arms. Von dimes I dinks I c'u'd t'row you, unt anodder dimes I dinks you c'u'd t'row me. Vat you do ous here anyvay?"

"We ar' on a hunt," said Jeff. "That young chap come out alonger us arter deer, grizzly an' buffler. I've told him thar ain't much safety hyar, 'cause the red niggers is thick ez flies on sp'iled bacon. Howsomever, ef he ain't afraid, I ain't got no call to be, seein' it's the life I lead every year. Much of a shot, you?"

"I pees a Toochmans," said Yost, who did not quite understand him, or else, with the sly humor peculiar to him, was desirous of puzzling his new friend.

"Oh, shet up. I mean, can you fire a rifle?" said Rooter,

"I vires mine gun deux or dree dimes. I pees 'fraid mit vierearms," said Yost, with a sly look.

"Kin ye hit anything with a shootin'-iron? You kerry a durned good one, an' ef ye kain't shoot, it's a pity to hev it throwed away. Let's try a shot."

"I tinks I can nefer hit anyt'ings ven I shoots," said the Dutchman. "Shpose dis gun should kick? Den I pees kilt."

"Don't be afraid. Let me load it for ye."

"No," said Yost, laying a protecting hand on his rifle, "I loads him mineself. Off you loads him, you puts in too mooch powder. Dat ish nix goot."

He loaded the piece awkwardly enough, and they looked about them for something to shoot at. At this moment a pair of turkey-buzzards, attracted by some offal which had been thrown on the grass, alighted about three hundred yards away, and began to feed.

"Thar's a chaine," said Jeff, eagerly. "Try yer hand at them birds off thar."

"Vot?" demanded Yost. "Dey ish too fur away. I can nix shoot dem."

"Yes ye kin. 'Tain't a foot more then three hundred yards. Try them once't. I know a

man that kin hold a rifle straight kin fetch 'em every time."

"Perhaps I can nix holt him straight. Some-dimes I holt him straight, odder dimes I bolt him more crooked ash der duyvel. Off a man vos haf deux pair of eyes, den he hit dem pirds. You shoot."

Jeff raised his rifle to his shoulder, took a steady aim, and fired. One of the birds sprung into the air and fell dead, the other rose aloft. As he did so, to the surprise of every one, Hoppen brought his rifle to his shoulder, took a quick aim, and fired. As the smoke curled slowly upward, they saw the bird, with closed wings, falling swiftly to the earth. Yost dropped his rifle and threw up his hands in astonishment.

"Gootness cracious! I vas hit de pird mit mine cun!" he cried.

"Didn't you think you could hit it?" asked Dan, suspiciously. "It seemed to me you meant to do it. That shot was done like an old hand in the business. Tell the truth, now. You know all about a rifle."

"Off course I knows all about a rifles," said Hoppen, indignantly. "You dakes de little cun, unt puts in some bowder. Den you puts in some baber, unt trives it down mit t'e ramrot. Den you puts in a pall, unt wraps a biece off ledder rount it. Den you puts on a cap, unt cocks ter cun. Den you shuts bot' eyes unt vires it off, unt tam der cun percause it kicks. Dat ish vat you toes. I know dat very vell."

"It mus' hev been a chaine shot ye know," said Jeff, "'cause thar ain't many of us on the prairie c'u'd hit a buzzard at three hundred yards, let alone on the wing. You didn't mean to kill him, I know."

"Dat ish von lie," said Yost, calmly. "I means to klll him pad enough. Dere ish a coot many t'ings mit dish life vat ve means to do, put ve can't always do it. Vat ve toes mit der pird, now ve haf shot him?"

"Eat him, of course," said Jeff, winking at his companions. "Didn't ye know that this yer' is one of the best birds on the plains?"

"Nix," said the Dutchman, shortly.

"I'll go and git it fer ye," said Jeff, with surprising good-nature. "Ye must be tired and hungry too, seein' ez how ye hev walked a good ways. I'll cook it fer ye, too."

"Vat you says? You cook dat pird vor me?"

"Yes," replied Jeff. "I wouldn't fer any other man."

"You very goot. Vell, co unt git him."

Jeff walked off hastily, after making a signal to his friends to say nothing, and soon returned, carrying a buzzard in a gingerly manner, as if he did not care to touch it more than was necessary. Nothing would have induced him to touch the filthy bird, but the desire to play a practical joke, for which these men are famous. The rest looked on smiling, though Dan was determined not to let the joke go too far.

"Vere ish your pird?" asked Yost.

"Shot all to pieces," said Jeff. "Thet's a powerful good gun of mine; a mighty good one, you bet. 'Tain't offen ye find a better one. Thet gun kin kerry a ball jest fifty mile. It kin shoot a thing jest ez fur away ez a man likes to strain his eyes to see. All he's got to do is to

hold it up to his shoulder, p'int it at the objec', an' pull the trigger. Ef thet ain't sart'in de'th, raise my ha'r."

As he spoke, he was busily employed in pulling the feathers from the bird, with a curious contraction at the base of the nose, which was not unobserved by Hoppen. The task was done at length, and a fire lighted. In a moment the bird was swinging on a notched stick over the blaze, carefully attended to by the busy hunters, who relished the joke of making a Dutchman eat a turkey buzzard immensely. Dan looked on in silence. At last he spoke:

"Did you come out here without a horse?"

The Dutchman turned a questioning look upon the face of the speaker before he answered. There was a lurking suspicion in the dark eyes, and Hoppen thought twice before he answered.

"Nein. I cooms ous from St. Shoseph mit a goot horse. Put ous dere py der river he shtrays away, unt I can nix find him. I looks for him all one day, unt ven I gets tired ous, I lays down unt goes to shleep. Ven I vakes up, you vas shaking me mit your hant, unt delling me off I was not git oop vile you dalks mit me, der pears vould eat me. I vakes oop den. I vas not vant to shstay dere any longer. I pees 'fraid mit der pears."

"It is a great pity you have lost your horse," said Dan. "Luckily for you, we have a spare one which you can ride. I take it for granted you know how."

"Yaw, I rides some."

"Let's git up a little game!" cried Jeff, forgetting the buzzard as he saw an opening for new mischief. "Let's show Dutchy how the Indians make a moccasin out of bark."

"Come, come—" began Dan. "Don't go too far."

Jeff took his arm and led him aside. "Look yer', capt'in. You must be a little keerful. Frontier men will have their fun. They must, you know. Now, we ain't going to hurt the Dutchman a bit. I like him. He's a right good fellow at bottom, an' ef he l'arns these little games from us, he won't l'arn 'em from some one thet will use him rough. You l'arnt how to make a moccasin yourself, didn't ye?"

Dan laughed. "I believe I did," he said. "Very well. Go ahead, only don't be hard on him. I think we shall find him of service before we get to the end of our hunt."

"Thet's jest the idee, capt'in. He's got to l'arn the ways of the woods, an' he mou't as well l'arn 'em hyar as anywhar else."

They went back to the fire, and Jeff diving into the depths of his "kit," which was thrown upon the grass near at hand, produced what appeared to be a thick piece of bark, about six inches wide and a foot long.

"See hyar, Dutchy."

"My name ish Hoppen; Yost Hoppen."

"Jerusalem, what a handle! All right. See hyar. Them shoes of yours is gittin' worn out mighty fast."

"Yaw. I pees very hart on my shoons," said Yost. "I vear ous more schoons as vould make a man so rich as nefar was. Off I could only make my own schoons I should pee very glad."

"Ye kin ef ye want to," said Jeff. "It's mighty easy. I make mine, so do all the men thet ain't got wives out hyar. Look at thet moccasin. No man ain't got no right to wear a plantation like that under you out hyar on the trail. No, he ain't, by gracious. Anybody could foller the trail ye leave, by feelin' along the track. Ye orter w'ar moccasins."

"I dinks dat is drue," said Hoppen. "Put how ter tuyvel vill a man vear moccasins ven he no moccasins haf? I can nix make dem."

"I'll teach ye low."

"Vill you? Dat ish goot. Dat ish better ash goot! I likes you more ash efer. Show me, den."

"Come hyar," said Jeff, laying the piece of bark he held on the ground. "Lordy. It's easy ez goose-grease. I've l'arnt a durned good many how to make moccasins, Indian fashion. I'm what ye might call a Philanthropist. Durned ef I think thar ought ter be any sech words in the English language. But thar is, an' thar will be. Put yer foot on that piece of bark."

Hoppen obeyed, and placed his right foot on the bark. Jeff stooped and pretended to arrange his foot. But he did not get it in the proper position.

"Move it a little more this way," said he. "That's right. A little more weight on it. That ain't enough. Lift up yer other foot. I want to git yer measure."

Hoppen did as he was bid, and the heels of the Dutchman appeared in the air, and his head struck the prairie grass with a dull thud. The whole thing was a trick. The bark, instead of consisting of a single piece, in reality contained two, fitted together nicely, and coated with grease on the inside. The moment the victim consents to lift his foot from the ground, the upper piece is jerked suddenly away, and in spite of his struggles, the victim seeks his mother earth. Hoppen scrambled up, but not quickly enough, it seemed, to see Jeff set the two pieces together again.

"What ar' ye tumblin' about in that way fur you?" demanded the guide, in assumed anger. "I'd a'most got yer measure, when over ye went."

"I dakes mine own measure," retorted the Dutchman. "I dinks some von bushes me down."

"No, sirree. Ain't nobody teched ye. Come along and git yer measure, or ye don't git no moccasins from me."

"You show me how, den," said Yost. The party gathered about them, and Jeff proceeded to show how it was done.

"Ye put yer fo t on it so," he said, placing his moccasin foot in the proper position, "an' lift the other foot in this way."

"How you does him?" demanded Yost, coming nearer. "Do him again."

Jeff again placed his foot on the bark and lifted the other. Yost was very near. Bending forward suddenly, he gave a quick tug at the bark. The biter was bit. Down went Jeff amid a hearty peal of laughter, the second which had greeted his downfall that day. He sat upright, with a comical expression on his face, and shouted:

"Thar I is, kerwhoop! An' I took the hint jest ez I teched the grass. He did it cute, too."

A new roar of laughter greeted the confession. Jeff rose, casting a puzzled look at the Dutchman, whose face was as stolid and expressionless as ever. Dan thought he detected a cunning twinkle in his blue eyes. But, the impression was gone in a moment.

"Durn me ef I don't think thar's more in thet Dutchman then he lets on," muttered Jeff. "Never you mind. I'll ketch him yit. He kain't always fool old Jeff. He knows his biz on a raft."

With these words he sat down at the fire and again turned his attention to the buzzard, which was cooking with any thing but a savory smell. The men moved further out of the circle of the flame, holding their noses.

"I dinks I smell somet'ings," said Yost, snuffing at the air, like a war-horse.

"No ye don't," replied Jeff. "Don't git thet idee into yer head. You don't smell nothing."

"Yaw. I pees sure I smells somet'ings mit mine nose," answered Hoppen, again elevating that organ. "'Tis nix goot meat I smells."

"Oh, don't be foolin'. Nobody else smells nothin'. Do ye, boys?"

"No," said one of the men, who had been holding his nose and breathing through his gaping mouth for fifteen minutes. "Durned ef I smell a thing."

"Course ye don't. Thar. The bird is done," said Jeff. "I don't s'pose I'll git any thanks fer my trouble. I'm always a-doin' somethin' thet I don't git no pay for. It's jest my way. No ceremony. Take it on the stick."

Yost took the bird cautiously, holding it at arm's length.

"Vat you call him?" he said.

"That? Possible you don't know the name of the great American partridge? That's curiss. I never thought no man could be so far behind the times ez that. That's the American partridge."

"He is a pig pird," said Yost.

"He is that; a durned big bird. Ye'r' in luck, old man. 'Tain't offen ye git sech a animile ez that all fer nothing; cooked too."

"'Tain't right vor you to do all the vork vor nottings," said Hoppen. "I knows petter ash dat. I helps you mit some off der pird. Dere; dake der creat American partridge, unt eat him oop. I smells him too mooch mit mine nose."

"You don't mean to say thet ye'r' gwine to make me lose all my time thet ar' way?" said Jeff. "Seems to me ef he didn't want the bird ye mou't 'a' said so."

"I gifs him to you. Vat you mat apout? Dat ish nice pird."

"Of course," replied Jeff, with a doubtful look. "Thar ain't no nicer. Eat a piece."

"I ain't hoongry mineself. I nefer vas hoongry dis night. I gifs him to you; eat all you vant."

The grin which had been getting broader every moment, suddenly broke out into a loud guffaw. Jeff looked round upon the circle of grinning faces with anything but a pleased expression. But the humor of the thing at last affected him. The grin became reflected on his own face, and, breaking into a laugh, he threw

the buzzard at the head of one of the guides who was laughing loudest, and shook Hoppen heartily by the hand. From that hour they were warm friends and proved so to each other in many a trying situation.

CHAPTER III.

THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE.

DAN CROWLEY took his place on guard that night, as his turn came. His companion on the watch was the half-breed, Joe Lane.

"Do you think it probable that we are in any danger, Joe?" asked Crowley.

"Perhaps. Good many Blackfeet on the trail now. Go out to hunt and carry scalping-knives under their blankets. All same. Bad blood now. Chief killed up at Snake River one day. Bad Indian, but the Blackfeet like him. See how it is? They like any bad man. Some Indian, myself; some white. But my white blood strongest."

Reared for the greater portion of his life among the tribes, Joe had never been able to get over their sententious mode of speech. He was a curiosity as he sat there, with his elbows on his knees, and a long, reed-stemmed pipe in his mouth, puffing out columns of smoke from his nose, a habit acquired among the savages.

"It would strangle me to smoke in that way," said Dan, laughing.

"Learned it among the Crows," said the half-breed. "Like it now. The Crows are the best tribe. Like the Nez Perces too. The Comanches and Arapahoes are thieves and murderers. Got to look out for them, or you will get into trouble. Blackfeet jus' as bad."

"I expected danger here. Some young fellows rather like it. I do, at any rate; and I think you like it too."

"None of our boys will flinch. Been on the trail long time. Jeff talk great deal in camp, but, when time comes, keeps his mouth shut as well as any man. Good man, Jeff."

"What you think of the Dutchman?"

"Don't know yet. Study him," said Joe.

"You think he needs study, then?"

"Yes. Shoots well; fooled Jeff; wrastled him down; no fool do that."

"We will keep an eye on him. Is he asleep?"

"Guess so. If he good man, glad to have him. Very strong."

"He is, indeed. I wonder what he meant by falling asleep by the river?"

"One eye open, p'r'aps," said Joe. "Lots of men do that. Wait! Get your rifle. See anything out thar?"

The night was clear and still. The moon was up, and a mellow radiance fell upon all around. A hundred yards away they saw something moving slightly. The next moment a figure appeared on horseback and was off like the wind. Joe sprung to his feet, and ran after it with leveled rifle. But he did not fire, not knowing what danger the report of a rifle might bring upon them. Dan followed him on a run, and they reached the spot where the figure had stood. Something white fluttering near the ground attracting Lane's attention, he stooped

and took it up, and found it to be a small piece of paper, attached to a stick thrust into the ground.

"Ha!" said Dan. "What have you there?"

"Looks like a letter," said Joe. "Read it; ain't a scholar myself."

Dan took the paper, and found it written in a female hand. Lifting it in the moonlight, he made out the words:

"Go back to your homes. Danger is about you on every hand—danger which will end in your destruction. I have warned you. Beware!"

Looking at the half-breed in the moonlight, Dan saw that his brown face had turned a little pale.

"I don't understand this," he said. "Do you, Joe?"

"Yes," said the half-breed. "It is the White Spirit."

"The White Spirit?"

"Yes. Something haunts the hills. Comes in the night to camp and warns people back. If they don't go, some of them, and sometimes all, are killed before many days. Came to me once near this very spot. I was out with Jeff Rooter and two others. The Spirit came and warned us. In two days the other boys were robbed and murdered. We took the hint and dug out."

"Have you ever seen the figure?"

"Only at night, as we saw it now," replied Joe.

"The White Spirit certainly writes a very pretty hand," replied Dan, smiling. "I see you are a little imbued with Indian superstition, Joe. If this were a spirit, there would be no occasion to resort to the very earthly process of writing letters. If there had been a postscript or two, I should have thought it was a woman."

He turned the paper over again and found a little more writing.

"I am your friend; I would save you. I pray you go away!"

"There it is," said Dan. "It is a woman."

Joe looked sullen. "Perhaps you want to say next I never see it. Come often, tell you. Jeff has seen it. Always in moonlight. Gives some sign of danger and rides away."

"Don't it seem a little curious that a spirit needs a horse?" asked Dan.

"Don't believe me. Wait; stay here and lose your scalp. May, if you want to."

"Don't get angry, Joe; I mean no harm. But I am not to blame if I do not believe in spirits. I was taught the other way. Shall we wake the rest and tell them?"

"Do you mean to stay?"

"Certainly; I mean to have my hunt out."

"Then keep still; don't tell. All guides leave you if they hear you see the White Spirit. They believe; they know. Seven times the White Spirit come down from the hills. Seven times the camp is full of sorrow. Some man dead; sometimes all. Their bones bleach in the sun because they would not take warning, like you."

"Would you have me run away like a coward? We came out here to hunt."

"If you not afraid, neither be I," said Joe. "Go back to camp. Keep your letter."

"I'll bet you the price of a new rifle I see and speak with your White Spirit before we leave the foot-hills."

"Speak to it! You crazy, I guess."

"Dare you bet?"

"Speak to it! You die! No man look spirit in the face. There are spirits in the rocks and trees, and they hear the words you say. They will carry your words to the White Spirit!"

"Let them carry as many of my words as they like. But if I do not see and speak with this White Spirit before we return, I will make you a present of my rifle. You have often said it is a good piece."

"And if you do, I will give you ten prime beaver pelts. That's agreed."

They went back to the camp. As they approached it, they saw some one moving back on his hands and knees. At that distance it was impossible to say what it was, and when they arrived at the camp, every man lay wrapped in his blanket, blissfully unconscious of any danger. The Dutchman especially was snoring in such a way as to awaken the mirth of Dan. The performance of a new beginner on the trombone was nothing to it. A gurgle, a gasp, and then a rolling snore, formed part of each bar of the concerted piece he was performing upon the instrument which had "schmelled something" wrong in the turkey buzzard.

"Who was it that left the camp just now and came in before us, Joe?" said Dan.

"Don't know. Thought it was Dutchy. He sleep pretty sound."

"Yes."

"Don't you think he sleep too sound for so early in the evening?" said Joe, in a slightly suspicious tone.

"I never should have thought of that," said Dan. "No, I don't think there can be any doubt as to the reality of that snore."

"All right, perhaps. I don't know. Don't talk to me. I want to think."

Through all that tedious night-watch the half-breed never spoke to his companion, but sat with his head upon his knees, smoking in that odd way of his, and apparently plunged deep in thought. As the morning came the men began to stir, and Jeff rolled lazily out of his blanket, with a snort and gasp. Yost was still snoring.

"Dinna ye hear the pibroch?" said Dan, winking at Jeff.

"What's the peabroth?" said Jeff.

"The Scotch bagpipes."

"Bagpipes? It's a wind-barrel. Hark to him, boys. Hear the Dutchman tune his fiddle. Oh, gallory, ain't it just splendid! Ef I ain't charmed, darn me for a fool. Give him a dig in the ribs, Joe."

The half-breed did as desired, and Yost sat up with a rumpled head, stretching himself and distorting his visage in an odd manner. Some of the party laughed.

"You besser look a little ous, vat you do? I pees der heavier sleeper mit America. Yaw. Der ish not so mooch ash von feller vat kin sleep so long vat I can."

"Were you not up during the night?" asked the young man, looking at him keenly.

The face of the German did not change.

"Up? Yaw. I vas up. I vas up in der clouds. I vas asleep."

"You are sure of that?"

"I nefer vas sure mit anytings," replied Yost. "I lies town here unt den I forgits velder I vas asleep or not. I nefer vakes oop to see."

"You are a wit, I see."

"A vit? Vat ish dat?"

"You make jokes."

"Shokes? I nefer makes a shoke in mine life. A shoke? Ven I dalks mit you, I dalks trut'—notting but trut'. So I dells you."

"Umph!" grunted Joe. "No more talk. Get ready. Off this morning."

"Whar we gwine at now, Joe?" asked Jeff Rooter.

"Higher up the foot-hills. Git some place where we safe. Guess we find a place, eh, Jeff?"

"You bet ye! Is Dutchy goin'?"

"S'pose so," said Joe. "Jus' as he likes."

"Yaw," said Yost; "I coes mit you. I nefer likes to shtay ous here mit ter pears. I vill shoot a pear some day mit mine cun."

"I reckon ye kin," said Jeff. "I mind how ye shot that ar' buzzard."

"Creat American pattridge," said Yost. "Yaw, I shoots him."

Rooter looked particularly foolish. He had hoped that Hoppen would forget the name he had given the turkey buzzard.

"Why, yes," he said sheepishly, "we call 'em turkey buzzard out hyar, sometimes."

"Vell, dat ish not so goot name. I calls dem creat American pattridge."

"He has you, Jeff. You may as well own up. Get out your horses, boys. Hoppen, yonder is your horse—the roan with the white star in his forehead. Look out for him. There is no better horse in the foot-hills when you are once in the saddle, but he is hard to back."

Yost approached the roan with a hesitating step. The horse threw his ears back viciously and uttered a defiant snort. Any judge of a horse would have been on the alert for a bite or kick. The Dutchman did not seem to pay any attention, until the roan darted out his long neck and made a savage bite at him. Hoppen, with extreme agility, acted a charade upon his name, imitating the posture of the father of evil in the garden of Eden. The roan ran to the extreme length of the lariat and made two or three passes at him. The next moment the two were down together on the green sward.

How it was done no one could say. They saw the brawny hand of Hoppen shoot out and seize the leg of the roan, and the next moment he was sprawling on the grass.

A short struggle took place, a trial of brute force and masculine will, and manhood triumphed.

Yost rose, and the roan lay trembling at his feet. The Dutchman touched him with his foot and he rose and stood panting. Hoppen threw on the saddle-cloth, put on the saddle, looked at his teeth, tightened the girths, and sprung upon his back.

They saw in a moment that he was a practiced horseman.

There was another thing which puzzled Dan.

This was the ease with which he adapted himself to the Mexican saddle, which at this time was hardly used except upon the plains. Hoppen seemed to know all about it, and lengthened his stirrups after the manner of mountain-men, in a way entirely different from the manner of the old school of horsemanship.

"Where did you learn to ride?" asked Dan, as the party rode away beside the shining stream.

Hoppen looked up with an odd smile. There was something so cunning in it that Dan felt more and more the conviction that this man was not what he seemed. But the first words he spoke were so transcendently Dutch that he was immediately ashamed of his suspicions.

"I learn mit St. Shoseph. I lifs ous of town mit a varm. I keeps goot many horses. I nefer vinds von I vas afraid to ride."

"How did you tame that fellow? I was a little afraid you had more than your match."

"I t'row him down," said Yost, nodding.

"So I saw. But how? That is a strong horse and you are not a very large man."

Hoppen stretched out an arm for Dan to inspect. He ran his fingers along the powerful limb above the elbow, and felt the muscles, hard as wrought iron.

"You are very strong."

"A little. I t'row Jeff easy. Now look. He goot man; he drue man, put he fool too much. Get hurt some day. V'ere you coes now?"

"Into the mountain, to hunt for the beast known as the Indian devil—the Carcajou. I hope we may find it."

"Nefer see von?"

"No. By all accounts, they are not the most lovely thing in the world to tackle. But I want one, and I'll have him."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOUNTAIN PATH.

THEY left the plains behind and entered the passes of the hills. On either hand rose rugged cliffs, with low growths of pine and spruce upon the sides. A gloomy place. Dark shadows fell upon the path they trod, from cliff and pine tree overhanging it. In some places the road was so narrow that they were forced to advance in Indian file. Joe rode in front. Dan followed, next to him Yost. The two guides and Rooter brought up the rear. They were a strong and well-appointed body of men for that region, and men whom a band of savages would have hesitated long before attacking. Their knives and pistols were of the most approved manufacture, and any one of them could hit a man with a rifle-ball at six hundred yards.

"We orter know this hole, Jeff," said Joe, looking back at his comrade. "This is the place where we lost two of our boys. Never understood how it were done."

"'Twas the White Spirit," said Jeff. "You know it were, Joe Lane."

"So 'twas," said Nat Farrel, one of the guides. "I never thought of that. The White Sperrit haunts these hills. I don't like it overly well."

"Nor I nuther," said Jim Arnold, the other guide. "Say, Jeff, I s'pose you couldn't find no other place to hunt only here."

"Didn't Dan say he wanted to track a carcajou? I only ask you fair, Jim Arnold. Do you know any better place to look for the Indian devil? Say, now?"

"No, I don't," grumbled Jim. "But I don't like to face the White Sperrit."

"No more do I, Jim. But, we must hev the carcajou. Didn't Dan say that ef we tuk one, it would be two hundred dollars right in our fists? Ain't that nuthin'?"

"All right, Jeff. Never thought of that. White Sperrits be cussed. Who's afraid? I ain't, fer one. That's fifty dollars apiece. If I git that, an' I ever hold kings-and ag'in in old sledge, I won't back down acause I ain't got money enough. Now you bet."

"Them keerds will be the death of you yit, Jim Arnold! Don't I know you? As soon as ever you git any money in your fist what must you do but go your pile on kings-and, calculating to fill. You kain't allus do it, and ef you do, somebody will be sure to draw a flush hand and then whar's your kings-and, eh? I don't say nothin' ag'in' keerds. They ar' a providence to us trappers and guides. Like ez not we would git into some deviltry ef it wa'n't for an honest game of poker or old sledge. But, bet in reason, Jim."

"I don't reckon thar's any man that sails under the name o' Jeff Rooter kin lick me at keerds. I calculates I'm the best poker-player in this kentry. Yes, I do."

"All wrong, Jim. All ye know of keerds I told ye. Ye know thet."

"Don't lie now, Jeff. I kin lick any man that sez I ain't a better player than any of the Rooter family, father or son."

"That means ye kin lick me, don't it? Jest jump cff that mule and send for me onc't. You don't know me, I reckon. I'm the great Prayhary Flower. I'm the boss scrimmager of the Rocky Mount. You've hern tell of the man that took a buffler-bull by the tail and knocked out his brains ag'in' a pine stump? Twasn't much to do, but I did it."

"You don't say," muttered Jim, climbing slowly from his horse, and throwing the bridle to Nat. "Git down here. I'm the Almighty Catamount of the Big Red. I don't back down on no man. You took an insignificant little buffler-bull by the tail and knocked out his brains, did you? That ain't nothing, that ain't. Did you ever see me pull up a tree by the roots? Oh, git down."

Jeff was off in a moment, but Hoppen jumped down and catching the two men by the breast, held them at arm's length, in spite of their struggles.

"Kill the durned Dutchman," roared Jim; "what business hez he to interfere with white men?"

"Yoost you keep shtill, or I knocks your heat against der rock," replied the Dutchman, coolly. "Coom, coom. I'm not afraid mit you. Keep shtill. Vat you want to fight for?"

"Didn't he call me a liar?" roared Jeff, struggling to get away. "I want his skulp. Wahoo! Yip! Let me git at him. He desarves to die."

"He said he could beat me at poke, he did," shouted Jim,

"I knocks your beats togedder off you don't keep shtill. Now you listen mit me. Off you bromise me not to fight mit each udder, I let you co."

"This is sheer nonsense, Jeff," said Dan. "I am ashamed of you."

Jeff began to be a little abashed now that his anger began to cool. "I ain't got nothin' ag'in' Jim," said he. "But he ain't got no call to crow over me, hez he?"

"I tell you what to do," said Dan. "Let it rest until you go back to St. Louis after this trip, and then play against each other. But don't fight."

"Good enough, old man," said Jeff. "I agree. Do you, Jim?"

"Shake!" said Jim, extending his hand. Their little difference adjusted, they became better friends than ever, and for hours they rode side by side through the mountain pass, where it was wide enough, boasting of their exploits in these regions. Hoppen listened with a quiet smile. Dan, who had been watching him up to this time, rode up too and entered into conversation with him. He found, under the rude phraseology of the German, a vein of native cunning and shrewd good sense, which did not so much astonish him after what he had seen him do that day, and the evening before. Jeff regarded him with some doubt. The ease with which he had held both himself and the other guide had astonished him, at the same time giving him a high opinion of their strange companion's physical strength.

The party passed through a narrow defile in the mountain and entered upon a verdant tableland, a thousand feet above the level plain which they had quitted half a day before. At this moment a clear, sweet voice called them to a halt. Turning in surprise, they saw a woman standing on a flat rock a hundred feet above them, leaning upon a small rifle and looking down at them. A glorious woman! Her hair unconfined, was lifted by the passing breeze, and swept in waving curls about her symmetrical form. Her dress was a sort of tartan, and a sash of the same material was thrown over her shoulders and knotted at her waist. Her feet were small and shod in dainty boots, slashed and embroidered in a fanciful manner.

"Where do you go?" she cried. "Halt there, or you are dead men," the beautiful vision called out.

Astonishment kept them silent. Such a vision as this, appearing to them in the midst of the savage scenery, throned on a great rock, might well surprise them. Dan was the first to find his voice.

"You ask us where we are going with the air of one who has a right," he said. "We are going on a hunt."

"Turn back, then, while there is yet time," she said. "I warn you back from this terrible place, as I have warned many another. If you take my advice, it shall be well with you. The prairies are broad enough for us all. Leave to those who claim it the right to patrol these passes, as they have done for years."

"Others claim the pass, then?"

"Yes. They are not the ones to warn you back. That is my office. If you are foolhardy

enough to keep on, after what I have said, you do it at your peril."

"We accept the peril, and refuse to go back, unless we know what we have to fear. You see the men I have with me. They are not the ones to go back without reasons. You must give them to us."

"Other men have acted as you do," replied the girl, with an angry flush. "I have no more to say. I leave you to your own devices."

"Stay," said Dan, as she turned to go away. "A word before you go. Was it you who sent us the warning last night?"

"Ask no questions, for I will answer none. You have marked out your own course. Walk it, if you will. For my part, I have done all in my power to save you. But you will not be saved. Go your ways, and I will go mine."

"We are grateful to you for your interest in our welfare, but we will not go back. If you know those from whom this danger is to come, let me warn *them*. We are not men to be trifled with, and will not submit tamely to be robbed or murdered. Let them remember this."

"You will *not* be warned. Farewell, then, and when the time comes, remember that Maid Marian warned you in the Robbers' Pass."

She turned and darted up the rocks with the agility of the mountain goat. Upon the summit she paused and made them a mute gesture of farewell, which was full of dignity and grace. The next moment the rock was vacant, and the party stood dumfounded, gazing at the spot where she had stood.

"Now let me ask you why you didn't keep the durned witch?" growled Jeff. "You see if trouble don't come out of it."

"Don't let me see you take hold of a lady in that way again, Mr. Rooter, while you are under my orders."

"Oh! You don't say! A *lady*, too! That devil says she knows me. I don't know her. But, if you don't wish you'd kept her for a safeguard, then my name ain't Jeff Rooter. Come along."

CHAPTER V.

A NEW-COMER.

THEY made a camp in a secluded pass among the mountains, not a mile from the spot where they had seen the mountain maid. Jeff Rooter was the leading spirit of the camp, and the other guides naturally looked to him for advice, unless he assumed too much, when they at once asserted their own dignity, after the manner of free trappers and guides.

"Thar's a man in these yer' regions I'd like to hev in the camp, ef he c'u'd be got," said Jeff, one day, as they came back from a deer-hunt. "He's the best man among us. None of the boys are at all afraid to allow thet old trapper Ben is the boss."

Yost drew near with an appearance of interest, which did not escape the attention of Dan, who was watching him closely.

"Black Hills Ben?" said Dan. "Who is he?"

"Ben Miffin is his name. He's tramped these plains time out of mind, an' thar ain't a man atween Laramie and the Columby thet don't know him. He's been a Crow chief in his time. That ain't all. He hates Blackfeet like death,

an' he reckons it's his duty to see thet nobody is wronged by 'em hyarabouts. I wish he was hyar."

"Do you know where to find him? I would pay him well to join us."

"I don't know where to place him jest now. Last time I seen him was up on the North Red, trappin'. Thar used to be famous huntin'-grounds hyar, but they ar' nigh about cleaned out. I don't reckon you'll object to lettin' the boys work fer themselves when they ain't huntin' fer you?"

"Not at all," said Dan.

"Because, ef they kin pick up a little somethin' by the'rselves, aside from what you pay 'em, it's so much cl'ar gain. The ground ain't nigh so good ez 'twas onc't, but it ain't quite bad. Thar's han'some pelts to be got by them thet's thrifty."

Yost took to the work with unusual aptitude, which awakened the suspicions of Jeff Rooter more and more. His success was something almost wonderful. It was rather early for trapping, but the nights were very cold, though no snow had fallen as yet. Besides two or three packs of beaver-skins, Yost secured a number of martins and mink, and several other skins.

But the Dutchman had an enemy who was more than his match. Nearly every day one of his traps which he had set in a favorable place, was dragged out of the water and its contents devoured. It was no human thief who did the deed, for they would never have torn the skin into shreds and patches, and left the bones scattered on the ground, gnawed clean of flesh. The thief was partial to that particular trap. Not a day passed but Yost suffered loss both in his pockets and morals. For every beaver lost caused him to swear terribly, a habit which was fearfully developed in him. He told his troubles to Jeff Rooter, and the old guide went out with him to view the ground.

"I know what it is," said he, looking at the scattered remains of a fine beaver. "Only one animile c'u'd hev the heart to do it."

"Vat is it?"

"It's a wolverine, an no mistake," said Jeff. "I'll bet money a wolverine knows more than any man in this camp."

"Vat ish a wolverine?"

"Don't you know? It's one of the durndest thieves ye ever saw in the shape of an animile. Steal! Good Lord, they'll beat a Blackfoot, chaw me into inch pieces ef they won't. The durndest critter? How many times hev she cleaned out yer trap?"

"More ash seven dimes, so help me cracious," said the Dutchman.

"Yes? An' she'll do it every time thar's anything in it so long as you set a trap for beaver. Why don't ye set a deadfall for her?"

"I don't know him," said Yost.

"I'll show it to ye, then," said the other.

"Durn it, we kain't be eaten up by the varmint. Show me whar she comes."

They went up the canyon about a qpartar of a miie. The trap was set in a sheltered nook close to the base of a rocky bluff. Jeff laughed heartily to see so many bones scattered on every hand, the remains of the wolverine's visits at various times.

"You may laff off you wants to, Sheff Rooter. Shpose dese vash shtole from you, maybe you laff t'other side off your mout'."

"I kain't help havin' a laugh about sech a sight ez thet thar. Don't stop me. Let a chap laugh, kain't ye?"

"Dere!" cried Yost. "He's peen here ag'in. Look at my trap."

There indeed was the article in question, pulled up out of the water with the hind legs of a fine beaver sticking in it, the result of the last raid.

"Oh, cracious to gootness!" cried Yost, "vat a sight ish dat ver mine eyes to see! I dinks dat ish vorse nor any t'ings vat I sees. Dat peaver vash t'e pig feller vat I dries to get so long. Ach, mein Cott! Let us catch dat wolverine unt Shim shall cook him, unt so help me cracious ash I vill eat him."

Jeff showed him how to do the work, and he set about making a deadfall. In an hour it was done. He wanted to stay and see the wolverine come into the trap, but the trapper would not let him do so.

"Don't ye try it," he said. "The cunnin' varmint kin smell a man half a mile off, easy enough. Ye kain't think how much they know. A man ain't got any chance with them, 'cause they won't come within gunshot unless they're pooty hungry. 'Tain't off'en we kin get a wolverine. Come away. I ain't sure the deadfall will fetch her. Ef thar is any way to git under it, er over it, she'll do it."

The bait which Yost had placed on the end of the deadfall was so arranged that if anything pulled at it a weight fell from the either end of the log and it dropped across the body of the thief, generally breaking its back. The trap he built was a good one, and he had great faith in its success. During the afternoon he went up to see if anything was in the trap. Jeff was with him. As they came near they could see that the log had fallen.

"Ve've got him!" cried Yost.

"Don't be too sure of that," replied Jeff. "Ye kain't ketch a wolverine every day."

He was right. When they came to the spot, they found the trap empty both of thief and meat. Too cunning to go under the log, the wolverine had gone on it, and pulled at the meat from above. Of course the tree fell, but the thief, after eating the meat, walked coolly away. Yost was in a rage. He swore oaths which none but German lips can attain without incurring the danger of lockjaw. He called down all kinds of anathemas on the head of the unfortunate thief, while Jeff stood by, shaking with laughter.

"I judge ye ain't answerable for swearing after sech a loss as thet ar'," said he. "I'd sw'ar too. But what ar' ye goin' to do?"

"I fix him dis dimes, so ash my name ish Yost Hoppen. Vait; it ish getting late. I fix him."

He went back to camp, and returned shortly with a lariat and some more bait. He then loaded his gun, putting in a double charge of powder and a handful of buckshot. He then climbed a tree and suspended the gun to a limb by means of the lariat, in such a way that a pull on the muzzle would discharge it. To the muz-

zle he attached a piece of meat in a tempting manner.

"Dere!" he cried, contemplating his invention with great pride. "You see vat ish done. Pymby cooms volverine, takes bolt off'n de meat. Pop! bang! She keels over. Dat ish goot. Yaw!"

"Thet's a good trap," said Jeff. "I judge thet will fix her flint eternally. Ef it don't, I'm a liar. Let's go back to camp."

They did so—Yost looking back lovingly at his invention, and declaiming loudly in relation to its merits. On their way back they stopped at such of their traps as lay between them and camp and took out the spoils found there. Jeff had just taken a fine beaver from a trap, when he heard the report of the gun they had left.

"Thar she goes!" he cried. "Anyway, yer trap has not failed to git the gun off."

"Vat you pets dat I haf not kill von volverine?" cried the Dutchman.

"I'll bet five beaver pelts ag'in' a single one," said Jeff.

"I dakes dat pet, Sheff. I makes finiff peaver-skins so easy ash nottings vas. Coom; ve coes unt prings in my volverine."

It was now dark, and Jeff did not care to go back. But he had bet, and wanted the bet decided. So there was nothing for it but to go. It did not take long to reach the place where the trap had been set. The gun no longer hung in the tree. The wolverine did not lay dead at the roots. But there lay the gun, as it had fallen.

"The cute varmint!" said Ben. "See what she's done!"

The animal had climbed the tree and gnawed off the lariat, letting the gun fall. Of course it went off, and before the trappers arrived upon the scene the strange beast was away into the depths of the forest, carrying the bait which she had so richly earned.

The rage of poor Yost passed all description. As before, he danced about, swearing his entire vocabulary of choice Dutch oaths, much to the delight of Jeff, who stood near enjoying the scene.

"This yer' is too tough a colt for ye to manage," he said. "Let me take hold of her. I judge thet thar is only one way to fetch her, an' now thet she hev bothered ye so. I'm the man to ketch her. It's an old head, none of yer fools of animiles, ye bet."

"Vat ye do, Sheff?" replied Yost, in high displeasure. "You no petter ash I pe. You can nix catch her. She pees too much vor you."

"I calculate not, ole man. Prehaps ye don't know me. Now stand aside and let a feller work as he knows how."

The first thing he did was to bend down a small tree to a level with a stump of a tree which he had cut down, and fastened it tightly so that it could not spring back. In the top of this tree he placed a large trap, one of the strongest he had, which happened to be set near at hand. This he baited with a choice piece of meat. When all was done he undid the fastenings and placed it in such a way that the moment the trap sprung and the animal caught began to struggle, the tree would spring into air. The trap itself was so buried under

the leaves that an animal, to reach the bait, must get upon the body of the tree and cross it. When all was ready Yost accompanied the trapper back to camp, grumbling at the ill-success of his last trap. Jeff said nothing.

"I dells you tish no goot," said the Dutchman. "You can nix catch her, anyhow. Don't I know? S'pose I pees a vool? Dish ish no volverine dat dakes mine peaver; dat ish all voolishness; dis ish von tuyfel, unt notting else; dat ish vat I dinks; yaw."

"I'll ketch him fer all that," said Jeff. "Does ye know who I learned the trick from? 'Twas Trapper Ben; old Ben Miffin, as I was tellin' ye 'bout. He's 'bout the cutest varmint ye ever see, that old Ben."

"I likes to see him."

"They say he's got a new cummerade lately—a big Dutchman named Snyder—Jan Snyder. I never see him, but they do say he's nigh about ez smart ez the old man hisself."

"Doochmans smart? You's voolin' mit me now, Sheff Rooter. You nefer dinks a Doochmans ish smart."

"Yes I does; you be, fer one. But never mind thet. You want to see me catch a wolverine the way old Ben does it. You jest lay low an' keep shady; old Jeff kin do it. They kain't fool him wuth a cent."

"Do it to-night," pleaded Yost.

"No, to-morrer."

They returned to camp and said nothing about the wolverine. Next morning, quite early, they started for the trap. Jeff, much to the disgust of Yost, insisted upon stopping every now and then at his traps, and taking out the captives. "He wa'n't goin' to lose his time," he said. In vain Yost begged him to proceed, for he was in a hurry to get to the trap and see if the animal was taken. At length they reached the trap, and Yost uttered a wild shout of triumph.

The top of the three was swaying in the air, and there, dangling by one foot, hung the wolverine, her feet just brushing the earth below. It was a huge animal, and she turned her vicious head from side to side to catch a glimpse of the new-comers. Jeff echoed the cry of his companion and started forward on the run. The wolverine began to struggle, knowing the fate in store for it, and sent up its low, peculiar note of alarm.

"Thar she hangs, the cantankerous reptile," said Jeff. "Now d'ye say I kain't ketch a wolverine?"

"You did it bully," said some one near them, in a quiet tone. Jeff looked up quickly, and brought his rifle forward, but checked himself when he saw who the new-comer was, darted forward, and began to shake hands with him earnestly. It was an old man, hale and strong yet, with many streaks of gray running through his once raven locks. The face was a peculiar one, but full of spirit, and the black eyes had fire enough in them yet. His dress was that of the trapper and guide. He carried a rifle of the most approved make, and a splendid revolver hung in his belt.

"Ben Miffin! By gracious, I'm glad to see ye."

"Same to ye, old boy!" replied Ben. "Come

out with a huntin'-party of boys from the towns, I judge?"

"Jess so, Ben."

"Likely to lose yer skulps, too. It beats all human natur' how resky boys will be."

"I ain't quite a boy, Ben Miffin."

"Yes, ye be. Ye'r' a boy to me, Jeff Rooter. Oh, git out. I've tramped these pararies too much not to know what I'm talkin'. Danger! That ain't no word fer it, Jeff. Don't think I've bin asleep. I've bin a-watchin' ye, mighty clost. I knowed of danger ye didn't know nothin' 'bout. Yes I did."

"Then why didn't ye come an' tell us, Ben?" said Jeff reproachfully.

"Teach yer grandmother, Jeff Rooter. I sorter reckon I orter know when to speak an' when to keep still. Mou't be ye've seen the White Sperrit."

"How did ye know that?"

"Never you mind. Didn't it warn ye to git up an' dust? Now, why didn't ye take advice? I ain't overly fond of these youngsters thet comes out hyar so off'n nowadays. They drive all the game from the plains. Time was when I c'u'd drop a deer or a buffler on any spot of ground I liked. I kain't do it, now, an' I'm minded to travel further west. It's gittin' too closely settled about yer' fer my way of thinkin'."

Closely settled. Jeff could not forbear a smile as he looked about him. There stood the eternal hills, as they had stood for ages. The river flowed at their feet, and the trees hung heavy upon the mountain-side.

"Ye'r' thinkin' it don't look none too much like bein' settled about yer'. Mebbe it don't look so to you, but does to me. I've seen the day when to see a white man in this region twice a year would be a wonderful thing. 'Tain't so now. An' besides, thar's more hyar than you think."

"Who be they?"

"I ain't goin' to tell ye now. 'Twould only make ye uneasy like, an' that wouldn't do no good. No, wait till the time comes. Though I'm jubous it would be better ef ye would couple up an' leave."

"All right: stay ef ye like; I ain't goin' to say nothin' ag'in' it, am I? Not a bit. But look yer'. I'm goin' to watch ye. When I hol-ler, look out fer danger."

"You'll let us know?"

"You bet ye. Old Black Hills Ben is old Ben Miffin yit, an' he ain't goin' to stand by an' see wrong done to any one, not ef he knows it. 'Specially a white human. I'm gardeen of every one thet resks his neck among the Black Hills. They will do it. These young men will come hyar, though I've warned them not, ag'in and ag'in. But sence they do come, old Ben Miffin is the'r gardeen. Who but he! Does ye see this yer' rifle?"

"She is a beauty, Ben. Gosh! I wish't I owned sech a one."

"It's five year gone by when the boy ez sent me thet shook hands with me at old Laramie an' see'd me go out on the plains. Morris his name is; Bentley Morris. A brave lad an' true—a chap thet it wouldn't hurt a man so much to lose his life fer. Wal, I stood by him in danger an' he stood by me. Last spring when

I went to Laramie the cunnel sez to me, 'Ben,' sez he, 'thar's a packige hyar fur he.' Now I thort a packige was one of them steamboats thet run up an' down the river, an' I told him I didn't want to go nowhar. 'You're mistaken,' sez he. 'Some one bez sent ye somethin'.' An' he brung it out. Thar was a note from *her*, in her own hand-write, the gal thet was with us in danger."

"Who's she?"

"Her name was Milly. A beauty, she was. Not such a beauty ez the White Sperrit, ye understand, 'cause she lays over anythin' I see. She wasn't proud like the White Sperrit. But she used to call me father Ben, an' that took me, somehow. Ef I ever wish't I had a darter truly, it were then. A lovable gal like that 'un makes a man feel queer."

"Ye've bin married, though."

"I guess so. My wife was a Crow. The Green Snake was her name. A lively critter, she was. I'll back her to make things lively fur any man. I've traveled round some, myself, an' I've tried to trade off that woman to any responsible human, but I kain't do it. She ain't a bad-lookin' female, fur an Injun, but Lord! When did any woman hev *her* tongue? She'd talk a peaceable man stone-blind in half a year's time. I've been lookin' round fur a deaf man thet would like to tackle her. A deaf 'un would be a good joke on her, I'll bet."

"So 'twould!" said Jeff, laughing.

"I tried to sell her to Jan Schneider onc't," said Ben, with a sly glance at the immovable figure of the Dutchman who stood leaning on his rifle during the conversation, and making no attempt to join in it. "I told him about her, an' blame my cats ef he'd give a knife fur her—jest a common buck-horn handled butcher-knife. He was a queer 'un. Never knew Jan, did ye, Jeff?"

"Never," said Jeff. "I were speakin' to this man 'bout him a minit ago. His name is Yost Hoppen. Dutchy, this yer' is Ben Miffin, what I told ye about."

"Sarvice to ye, mister what's yer name. I'm comfortable enough. Hope yer pooty peart. Ye make me think of Jan Schneider. Yer ez like ez two peas."

"Vere Jan now?" asked Yost.

"He ain't fur away," said Ben, with a sly wink. "Not overly fur. I kin git him by a whistle, ef I'm minded to it. Wal, onc't more, Jeff, look out fur yerself. Thar's them in these hills ain't overly fond of ye, an' mou't be ye'll git into trouble. But ef the wu'st comes to the wu'st, yer party is all *men*, and men ar' easier to handle than females."

"Won't ye come in an' see the boys? Thar's some among 'em would be glad to see ye. So would the gentleman. He was a-sayin' no later than day before yesterday thet he would give money to hev you with us."

"Would he though?"

"You kin bet on it."

"Then I'm ther man, sure. I'll go in an' see what they've got to say. Ef so be they keer to hev me, I'm open to make honest money any way I kin. I heern tell ye was minded to take a carcajou. 'Tain't every one knows whar to find one. I does."

"Come along. Ye'r' the man we want."

They entered the camp together, where Yost triumphantly produced the ears of the wolverine as an evidence that he would eat no more beaver. The simple faith and readiness of Ben struck the hunters favorably and he was engaged to stay with the party while in that region. He claimed the right to go away for three days first, promising to come back at the end of that time. He left the camp just at dusk. Not long after Yost strolled out alone toward the river-side. An hour passed, and Jeff went to look for him. He searched high and low in vain. The Dutchman was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

A VISITOR.

THE surprise occasioned by the sudden departure of the Dutchman passed away after a day or so. Free trappers get used to these things, and they consoled themselves with the supposition that he had left behind the results of his trapping since they had come to the camp. Opening the cache with the intention of dividing the spoil among themselves, their purpose changed. Every skin belonging to Yost had disappeared. He was honest enough, however, to refrain from touching anything which did not belong to him. The traps which had been lent him by Jeff Rooter and the rest, were left where he had set them.

"He'll come back," said Jeff. "I ain't off'n fooled in a man. He'll be sure to come back; ef he's gone away, he's gone fer a good reason. Don't go back on him too soon. He don't look like a bad man; Ben Miffin said so."

"He went away soon after Ben did," said Daniel, musingly. "There may be something in it. Let us wait."

"Somebody coming," said the half-breed at this moment, raising his hand for silence.

The talking ceased, and every eye was turned toward the entrance to the canyon. The rapid beat of coming hoofs could be heard, and in a moment a white horse dashed into the valley, bearing upon his back the girl known as the White Spirit.

She was looking over her shoulder in an attitude of fear, and Dan sprang into the saddle closely followed by Jeff Rooter and the half-breed.

Just then the heads of other horses appeared at the entrance of the canyon, and three Indians, with lances at rest, came on in pursuit of the flying girl.

Seeing the determined attitude assumed by the trappers and hunters, whom it was plain they had not expected to see, the Indians drew rein, and fled back over the path they had so lately traversed at their best speed. By the time they had turned, Dan Crowley had reached the side of the girl, and laid his hand upon her bridle-rein.

It seemed to him that she looked more beautiful to-day, flushed by the exercise of hard riding, than she had that day upon the mountain-side. Her eyes were downcast before the bold orbs of the young man.

"You were in danger," he said. "I am glad you came upon us so luckily. You are safe here."

"I thank you, sir," she said. "You have indeed rendered me a service. But that my horse stumbled in coming up the pass, I should have escaped easily. But Gypsy sprained her ankle badly. You will allow me to proceed."

"If you must hurry away, there is no man here who would attempt to stop you—not even Jeff Rooter, who was inclined to keep you as a hostage the other day. He will not do it again."

"No," said Jeff, "though I hold to it yet, that if we c'u'd keep her in the camp we sh'u'd be safe."

"You know much of the secrets of the hills," she said, "but you do not know all. I should be a living, breathing calamity to you."

"Then don't stay," said Jeff. "Do ye know a man called Ben Miffin?"

"I have seen him often. He saved me from death by the feet of a herd of buffaloes. I have much to thank him for."

"He is goin' to be one of our party in a day or two," said Jeff.

She looked at him angrily.

"It seems to me that every one I care for in the least will perish by getting himself into danger, simply to annoy me. Why have you entrapped that brave old man? He knows the danger better than any of you, and yet he will run his head into it in this blind, reckless way. Why place me under obligations for which I feel that I must make a base return?"

"You have done no harm to any one here," said Dan.

"Have done. You know nothing of it. I warned you all, as far as lay in my power; I would have saved you, but what could I do when all were against me? My power extends only thus far: I can warn you; if you refuse to take warning, be it on your own heads. But Ben Miffin must not come among you."

"In two days he will be here and take the lead of the party," said Dan. "I do not understand your warmth. Is he not a worthy man?"

"None more so; and therefore I would save him," she replied.

"From what?"

"I have not the power to tell."

"Let it pass then. Do you know the tribe of the Indians who pursued you just now?"

"Certainly; they were Crows."

"Might they not have been Blackfeet?"

"I do not fear Blackfeet; these were Crows," she answered.

Dan looked at the half-breed.

"White girl right," he said. "Crows; no Blackfeet."

"We shall be in danger from them," said Dan, musingly. "We thought ourselves safe from intrusion here; it seems that others know these passes as well as you, Jeff."

"I didn't think it," said Jeff, looking crestfallen. "Ben said thar war more about then I thought fur, an' he war right. I ain't sure we orter stay hyar, but now we've got in, don't let us be driv' out by nobody."

"Why should you be so obstinate," said the girl. "I have kept your fate away from you longer than you think; I cannot aid you much longer."

"Will you alight and eat? We are about to partake of food," said Dan.

"Thank you, I will do so; and I hope, too, before I go, to persuade you that this is no safe place for you."

"I am ready to listen to reason," said Dan, as he assisted her to alight.

"Which means, in plain English, that I am an unreasonable female," said the girl, accepting his hand in alighting. "Do not think so: I am in earnest in my desire to be of service to you."

"I do not doubt it," he said, bringing her near the fire. "Jeff, take care of the lady's horse, if you please. Give me that buffalo-skin, Nat; now my saddle. There—that is as comfortable a seat as I can give you."

"Thanks again; you are only too kind to one who could aid you, but dare not. Do not put yourself to so great trouble on my account; I do not deserve it."

"Allow me to be judge of that," said Dan.

"You are welcome to our camp, and we will do all we can to make your stay here a comfortable one. Our accommodations are not good, but such as they are, they are at your service."

"You are very kind, sir—too kind indeed. It makes me feel the obligation all the more. Will you add to it by asking one of your men to look at the horse? I am afraid he is badly hurt."

"Let me do it," said Jeff, starting up hastily.

"I'm an out an' outer with a hoss; an' if anything kin be done for the animile, I'm the boy to do it, you bet. I wish't Ben was hyar; he's the boss feller to take keer of a hoss."

"I know him well; and, unworthy as I am, the old man idolized me," said the girl, softly.

"Do you know that Trapper Ben is my type of an honest man? He is brave to a fault, generous to a fallen foe, and faithful to a friend, even to the death."

"You speak well of him."

"Who speaks ill? All the world does not contain a nobler heart. Rough, to be sure, and rude of speech, but he has a heart which would do credit to a prince. I am sorry he is coming here."

"You are a riddle I cannot read," said Dan, quickly. "Your vague warnings, while they may make us uneasy, cannot drive us away. I am having rare sport here. Buffalo, deer, and bear are the captives of my bow and spear. The men have a good supply of peltries, and when we kill a carcajou I shall be ready to return."

"I hope you may kill one speedily, then," said the girl. "Do you not hear horses' feet?"

"Yes; they come this way."

As he spoke the coming horsemen rounded the point of rocks and appeared in the valley. They were three in number and were well-armed and appointed. The horses they rode were of the mustang breed, strong limbed and fleet-footed. Two of the new-comers were ordinary-looking fellows enough, dressed in hunter's garb. But the man who rode in front was a remarkable person to meet in the backwoods. His frame was robust, and evidently burdened by fatigue and hardships. His face, which was almost faultless in its contour, was browned by exposure to the sun and wind of many climates. He wore no beard, but silky mustaches of the deepest black hung as low as

the base of the neck, giving him a brigandish air. His keen, dark eyes surveyed the group at the fire for a moment, and then, signing to his companions to halt, he rode forward alone.

"Good-day to all here, gentlemen. Ah, my dear Marian, I am glad to find you safe. Some one saw you go up the pass, and directly after three Indians followed you. Were you pursued?"

"Yes. These gentlemen drove back the savages. Did you not meet them in the pass?"

"Doubtless they heard us coming and concealed themselves. My thanks are due these gentlemen for your rescue. Perhaps they will favor me with their names."

"I am called Daniel Crowley," said Dan, acting as spokesman. "The others are trappers and guides. This is Jeff Rooter, this Nat Adams, this Indian Joe, and this Jim Arnold. Two of our party are absent. Black Hills Ben and a German, Yost Hoppen by name."

"Yost Hoppen?"

"Yes."

"A new-comer in these hills," said the visitor.

"At least I never saw him."

"He has but lately arrived here," said Dan.

"He left us somewhat abruptly."

"What sort of a fellow was he?"

Dan described the German. The eyes of the man brightened and he took off his cap and ran his fingers through his hair with a smile. As he did so they saw that he wore his hair in short curls.

"I know who this is," said he. "Confound his impudence. Do you know who I think it is? He left about the same time with Ben Miffin, did he not?"

"Soon after."

"Then it is Jan Schneider, the Dutch friend of Ben Miffin. They are both tricky customers, but the Dutchman is the worst. And if you would believe me, when he came out on the plains he was as perfect a specimen of the native Dutchman as you would wish to see."

"We thought him so now," said Dan. "Confound him, I should like to trounce him. What could have been his object?"

"Pure deviltry, and nothing else. People used to practice on him when he came out first, and he likes to return the compliment."

"Haw, haw!" roared Jeff. "You don't tell me the Dutchman fooled us all? Bully for him. He ain't no slouch or he wouldn't be with Ben Miffin, I allow. You ain't told us your name, mister."

"My name? Call me what you will. Any name will do," replied the other.

"Not prezactly so, mister. Dan Crowley hez been mighty free with our names. Stands to reason you orter return the compliment. Let's hear."

"I'm called Conrad Vesey."

"Never mind what ye'r' called. What's yer name?"

"I have given it. Now, Marian, if you are quite rested, I think we had better go."

"I will go, Conrad," said the girl, quickly. "Gentlemen, I thank you for what you have done. Is my horse fit to go, Mr. Rooter?"

"Course he is. He ain't hurt a bit. He got a gravel stone in his foot. I took it out, an' he's all right. He kin go."

"Thank you, Mr. Rooter."

Dan advanced to assist her into the saddle. But Conrad leaped to the ground and thrust himself between them in a manner almost amounting to rudeness.

"Excuse me," he said. "No man touches her hand but I. Allow me to aid you, Marian."

"You presume almost too much upon my good-nature, Conrad Vesey. Mr. Crowley, may I ask your aid in mounting?"

Dan again came forward, and helped her to the saddle. The other man stood by, looking savagely at the young gentleman. His color came and went in fitful flashes, and his eyes looked like burning coals. She saw his anger and looked at him with a glance as high as his own.

"You know that I will make this a bitter thing to you, my dear girl," he said, laughing in a short, fierce way.

"I know that you have the power, Conrad Vesey. I know my power too. Are you ready, sir?" she replied.

"If you are."

"Then mount and I will follow. I have a few words to say to these gentlemen, and beg you to ride on. I will not detain you five minutes."

"I will not do it."

"I tell you to go and let the lady speak," said Dan, whose blood was thoroughly up.

"And if I do not go?"

"I will compel you to do it."

Conrad, never removing his eye from the face of the speaker, thrust his hand into the breast of his coat and drew forth a silver bugle, which he made a movement to raise to his lips. At the sight of the bugle, Maid Marian sprang from the saddle and seized him by the arm. He shook her off.

"Do not sound, Conrad."

"Let me alone. I will sound the call."

"You shall not."

"Then beg my pardon for the insult you have offered me but now."

"I was wrong, Conrad. I acknowledge it. See! I have dismounted. If you are ready, so am I. You may put me into the saddle."

He passed his arm about her waist, raised her from the ground, and placed her lightly in the saddle, with a glance of triumph at Dan. Then the party rode away together, without a word of farewell on her part.

"The durned hound," growled Jeff. "I'd like to put a bullet right through his p'izon karkidge. Whar did he come from?"

"How can I tell?" said Dan. "What power has he over that sweet girl?"

"It beats me. He's a 'tarnal critter. He orter be skulped," said Jim.

"Ye'r' mighty right," said a voice close at hand.

"Yaw!" cried another.

CHAPTER VII.

IN PERIL.

THEY turned at the sound, and saw Black Hills Ben standing near, with a smile upon his face, and, close beside him, the man they had known as Yost Hoppen.

"You are here, Ben. I am glad you have

come. As for the person with you, I shall need some explanation of his conduct before I will consent to receive him among us," said Daniel.

"Very goot," said the German. "Vat you say mit me?"

"Did you give me your right name when we had you in camp?"

"Nein," replied the other, with a broad grin.

"My name ish Jan Schneider."

"Very well. What was your motive in trying to deceive us in that manner?"

"Yoost vor vun," said Jan. "Pen dells me to co und git into t'e camp unt vind ous who you vas. I coomes auver here unt town py ter rifer I makes pelieve I valls asleep. I nefer pees asleep at all; I vas in fun."

"You did not deceive us entirely; I suspected that you knew more than you showed upon the surface, and so did Jeff. You had no sinister motive, then?"

"I does vat Pen dells me," said Jan. "Now I dells you, I peen mit Pen more ash fiviff year. He goot mans, he help me goot many dimes ven I peen in trouble. He save me ven der Injun come, he save me vrom der vasser, he save me vrom der volfs, he bulls me ous vrom der mut ven Shules Tamant leaves me dere; unt ven he says, 'Do dis,' I does it, yoos ash he says."

"That's the way of it," said Ben. "Don't you bother Jan. He's a good feller, an' will stand by you ez long ez I do. I set him on you myself, an' he did jest ez I told him. Ef I quit ye, so will he. I've tried to make the durned Dutchman understand that I ain't wu'th a cent, but he won't believe it; he's so set in his way, the contrary cuss. Don't say no more about it. When you talk of me, you must count in Jan along with me, for I kan't git rid of him, an' I don't know ez I want to."

"Dat ish drue, vat he says," said Jan. "I never leaves him vile I lifs; he too goot to me."

"Let that go. Ye've had visitors, I allow," continued Ben.

"Yes; did you see them?"

"Bet yer life I did; I was hid in the bushes, an' seen the hull affair; an' ez true ez you live an' breathe, I thort ye'd git yer gruel when ye put the gal on the hoss. Ye don't know thet p'ison sarpent ez well ez I do."

"To whom do you refer? The man called Conrad Vesey?"

"You bet; though he ain't got no more claim to thet name than many another; he goes by a dozen; the Blackfeet call him the Sweeping Eagle; he calls hisself Conrad Vesey; his true name is Will Markman, an' a more p'izon snake ain't to be found on the prary. I know him. Some call him Will o' the Wisp."

"Who and what is he?"

"He's a man thet gets his money by robbin' free trappers. I wouldn't like to say how rich he's got. He's got an agint in every large town along the river, to git rid o' the pelts he steals, an' it brings him in piles of money."

"Do you mean to tell me that the fellow lives entirely by robbery and murder?"

"Course he does. It ain't peltries alone he takes; all's fish thet comes to his net; guns, clothes, ammunition, traps, anything. He hardly ever teches a camp until the'r about to break

up; thet's his nateral gait, you see. He lays back till all the work is done, an' then he gobbles up the hull party. Durn his picter, he stole a lot of pelts from me onc't upon a time, an' ef I git a chaine at him, I'll fix his flint eternally. I had half a mind to pull on him while he stood thar; ef it hadn't 'a' been fur the gal, I'd 'a' done it."

"Who is she?"

"She's got a strange hist'ry, hez thet gal; she war found wanderin' about in the snow on the prary down thar, a gal about eight year old; she's nigh onto seventeen now, though she's got the courage of a man. Conrad Vesey found her, an' he brung her up. He's a man of fu'st-rate eddication, an' he teachd her everything. She's apt to l'arn, an' so it needn't surprise ye thet she knows so much. It was his kindness in takin' car' of her thet established a sort of claim on her."

"I see," said Dan; "and on the strength of this he has obtained a power over her. She is a noble girl."

"She's all that. She don't know the half his deviltries, though she knows he's bad enuff."

"And this beautiful woman must pass her life in the society of such a man as that?" cried Dan. "It is horrible. Can nothing be done?"

"She would call it desartin' a friend to leave him now. He found her perishin', an' took keer on her. She never knew how she cum on the prary. I opine she was one of a party of immigrants, an' got strayed away somehow, or else the rest of the party got cut up, an' she ran away. 'Tain't nothin' sure. But whoever she is, a braver gal don't live on the airth, or a beautifuller. Gosh! ain't she han'sum?"

"She is indeed."

"She tries her best to save people; thet's how the story of the White Sperrit got about. She's usen to come by night an' try to warn men ag'in campin' hyarabouts. A many of 'em take warnin' an' quit. She wouldn't 'a' come to ye ag'in ef ye hadn't helped her out of the hands of Jeff Rooter. Don't ye tech her ag'in, Jeff, or I'll be in yer wool."

"I ain't goin' ter," grumbled Jeff. "I didn't see any better way; an' I say yit, thet ef we had her, Vesey wouldn't dare to strike at us."

"She shain't be hurted. I like the gal; she's been mighty kind to the old man. She told ye some story 'bout my savin' her life. 'Twa'n't me; 'twas Jan. Don't you deny it; ef ye do, thar ain't nobody hyar is goin' to believe ye."

"Don't you go to lie on yourself, Pen Miffin," roared Jan. "You s'pose der young lady ton't know who saved her? I dells you vat it is: off you dink you can put efery t'ing off on me, den I lets you know ash I vill not stand it. You safes der fraulein yourself; now den."

"I'll leave it out to the comp'ny," said Ben. "She'd got into the track of a herd of buffler, an' Jan an' me see them a-comin'. We rode down to see the fun, an' while I took the bridle of her horse an' led him away, Jan shot a mad bull thet was comin' at us full tilt."

"Liar! liar!" shouted Jan. "You runs right in der herd of puffaloes, unt dakes der girl ous; of course I shoots der pull. I shoots any pull ash dries to putt me."

"I have no doubt you did good service both

of y u," said Dan. "The young lady spoke of it; but how is it that she can live among this party of rough and brutal men? For I take it that this scoundrel must have a large party with him."

"You bet. The roughs an' villains of the Nor'west j'ine him. He's got a camp in one of the valleys north of this, an' thar they camp. Don't think thar ain't no wimmin thar. Most of the men bez got wives of the'r own. Thar's every nation under the sun in that gang. A story could be writ about 'em. They've built up a village, an' thar they live. They ar' great chums with the Blackfeet, an' this Markman holds the title of chief. When Whirling Breeze—that's a Blackfoot chief—ain't strong enough to do any jobs, he calls on Markman to help him."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, an' ef you want to show fight hyar, why, ten to one he calls in Whirling Breeze to help him. It ain't no tew to one he don't dew it anyhow, 'cause he will kill if he can, an' he'll want to lay it to the Blackfeet, 'cause the gal likes you, don't you see?"

"Do you think we are in danger of an attack?" said Dan.

"I should rather guess you *was*; no man ever insulted Will Markman yit, thet didn't git the wu'st of it. No, sirree! He'll be down on you like bricks. Bet yer life. He holds a grudge forever an' a day. I don't think I sh'u'd be above the sod ef the gal hadn't stood my friend. By the same token, I'd 'a' put a ball through his hide long ago, ef it hadn't been for *her*. So I guess we ar' nigh 'bout even."

"This is the strangest tale I ever heard. Why do not the trappers unite and put these scoundrels down?"

"They tried that onc't. But the brigade had hardly got together when the cusses vamoosed the ranch. When we got to the place we couldn't find hide nor hair of them. We hankered round the place a week, but it wasn't no use; they wouldn't come back. An' when we commenced to scatter they jest give us tar. We lost a good many of our boys that trip. That's the'r best hold; cut an' come ag'in."

"Do you expect an attack soon?"

"Kain't say. We must git ready fer it. I know them. I've got a place up hyar a bit we kin fortyfy. We'll do it too, an' then let 'em come. That's enough talk. Jan, give us a song."

"Vat I sings?" asked Jan.

"Anything. I ain't particular. Now you keep still, all of you."

Jan straightened up, and began to sing in English, with his irrepressible Dutch accent, which set the whole camp in a roar.

The song being finished, every one clapped the melodious German on the back and entreated him to give them another. But he was not to be coaxed.

"I sing no more now. Blenty song I got; sometimes I sings, udder dimes I not sing. Pen can sing no more ash von vrog. Put der young mans can sing. He got singing face."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Dan.

"Vy, you can dell by der face off a mans can sing. Auvery Doochman sings. It is yoost

so natural ash preathing vor a Doochmans to sing. Put dat ish not all. Dey know sometimes vat dey sings. Put a Yankee nix sing goot vor nottings unless he be trained good vile. Now yoost let der young shentlemans sing me a song, unt den I sings anudder von."

In order to get another song from him, Dan began a sentimental ballad, to which the German listened with great pleasure, for Dan had a very sweet tenor voice, and the clear notes awoke pleasant remembrances of songs in which he had joined with old companions beside the Rhine. When Dan had finished, Jan sung a German melody: "Where is the German Fatherland?"

It was something so touching, so full of melancholy yearning for the dear old land, so far away, that every man in the company began to like the Dutchman better, as a man who could cling to his love of country in a foreign land.

"That's somethin' like it, old man," said Ben. "Thank ye. I've proved ye, old friend. I know what ye ar'. Dead or alive, we are always friends."

The two clasped hands across the fire. Their hard, brown faces were a little troutled. They had fought and worked side by side through many a weary year, and knew each other well.

"Yes, Pen. The Doochman you pick oop in der peer saloon in St. Louis vill sthand by you, coom vat vill."

"That's right, boys!" said Dan. "Now, if you are ready, we will see this place which you think will do to fortify, Ben."

The trapper rose and led the way up the stream. Every one else followed. They kept on for half a mile, and reached a place where the stream widened and ran in two channels, leaving an island in the center—a rugged, irregular little place covered with rocks and loose slate.

"Why," said Dan, "we can make a fortress of that."

"That's what I thort," said Ben, quietly. "We kin try it, anyhow."

CHAPTER VIII.

LOOK SHARP!

THEY set to work in good earnest. Before three days had passed they had finished their fortification. It extended round three sides of the little place. In the rear rose the huge barrier of the mountain range, vast and high. The fortification they had built crossed the narrow pass in front at a place where, defended by three or four resolute men, an army might have been kept at bay. Down the mountain it was almost impossible for enemies to come, for human feet had never trod that place. Dan looked with considerable admiration at the work, when finished.

"'Tis nice," said Ben. "I'm a dab at buildin' forts, I reckon. I've helped to build many a one in my time. So's Jan."

"Yah," said Jan. "I helps Pen always."

"So ye hev, old boy. But the time bez come to show what's in ye now, ef ever. We sha'n't be left alone much longer. I'm goin' out on a scout. "You'd better come with me. The rest

of ye stand to yer arms, an' ef ye hear my rifle, then look out for danger."

The two scouts shouldered their rifles and marched away. They took a course down the mountain-side. They had not gone half a mile when the thunder of coming hoofs caused them to look up, and they saw Maid Marian coming toward them at a hard gallop. She drew up the panting steed close beside them and asked, eagerly:

"Where are they?"

"I don't reckon I orter tell ye, my beauty," said Black Hills Ben. "Ye'r in the sarvice of the in'my."

"Not willingly, Ben. You know that if I remain with them, it is because I believe that I can do good. And Conrad is not so wicked when I am kind to him. I am under obligations to that man. He took me up, a little houseless, homeless wanderer, and gave me a welcome and a home."

"But you know what he is," said Ben.

"True. I know he does wicked things. Crimes at which the heart grows sick are on his soul. I have saved many, but my time is nearly past. They are coming, and woe to these men in the camp. Turn back and warn them."

"And is 'Will o' the Wisp' coming? Now, may the black curse fall on him and all his villainous crew. Jan, turn back. 'Tain't no use to go on any further, ez I see. But ef you see 'Will o' the Wisp,' tell him this much from me: I've had a bullet molded for him this many a long day. I've got it now. An' ez sure ez he gives me a shot at him, jist so sure I rub him out. He knows whether I kin shoot, his own self."

"Here they come," cried Maid Marian. "Away!"

A confused tramping of horses' feet sounded on the mountain path, and the next moment the robbers began to troop into the valley. They raised wild shouts of triumph at the sight of the two scouts, and rushed to seize them. But Black Hills Ben was not the man to be taken readily. Shouting to Jan to follow, he dashed into an irregular path up the mountain-side, known to but few. Before the horsemen had reached the spot where they had stood, they were half-way up the steep. Here they made a stand, and their enemies, rough and savage as they were, dared not follow.

"Vy you no cooms oop here?" shouted Jan. "Yoost dry it vunce. Ve makes you veel pad off you do."

The wild band gathered at the mountain foot. Truly, as Ben had said, they were a motley group. There was hardly a nation under the sun unrepresented here. Indian, Negro, French, German, Spaniard, English and half-breed rode round the mountain base, and shouted uncouth oaths at the two men perched upon the mountain-side laughing at them.

"Who is it?" said Conrad, riding up at this moment. "Jasper Verton, do you know them?"

The man addressed as Jasper Verton was a pale faced, slight youth, who looked as if he had but lately left a college. Yet he was the most deliberate villain in the band, and was the second of "Will o' the Wisp" in his villainies.

"I know them very well," said Verton. "That scoundrel Miffin and his Dutchman. I think it would be better not to come in my way when I attempt to finish a fellow again. He would have been a dead man only for you."

"Marian took his part."

"So. And when Marian takes the part of any one it is understood that they are safe. Shall we follow those rascals? They are laughing at us."

"Follow the devil! How old Ben Miffin would laugh to see us dismount and begin to clamber up the rocks. They would kill us off, two at a time, before we could reach them. No. Let us on about the duty we have to perform. It will be all the easier that they are not of the party."

"Ben Miffin gave me a message for you, Conrad Vesey," said Marian.

"And what was it?"

"Say to 'Will o' the Wisp,' " he said, "that I have a bullet run for him, and if he gives me a shot at him I mean to rub him out."

A slight paleness showed itself in the face of the listener, but was gone in a moment. "The rogue dares to threaten me, then? I will make him sorry for that before many days. Forward, lads. There is much spoil in the camp of the enemy, and it is ours."

Marian accompanied the band, and they rode into the deserted camp. On every side they saw evidences of a hasty departure. Broken traps were scattered here and there, drinking cups battered out of shape, pieces of lariat and straps, and a number of condemned skins of many kinds. But the birds had flitted.

"This is your work," said the leader in a hoarse whisper, turning to Marian. "You have warned them to go away."

"Not I," said Marian. "At least not since the day you saw me here."

"I believe you lie."

"Lie!"

"I beg your pardon, Marian. I should not have said that. But you annoy me beyond description. I can not bear it. Now these people are gone, and who is to blame?"

"Maid Marian generally has her own way in the end," sneered Verton. "She said you should do these people no wrong. Conrad, a word in your ear."

"No. I wish to speak with him," said Marian.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Marian, but what I have to say is of interest to the whole band. It will take me but a moment. Now, Conrad."

The two went aside together. Verton's face looked like that of an Iago in conference with one of his tools.

"If you remember rightly," said he, "there is a young fellow among these hunters who is a handsome gallant, suited to a maiden's eye. What if I were to tell you that it is for *his* sake she wishes to save these people?"

"It may be," said Conrad, beginning to flush. "She showed him great favor when I saw her here."

"Certainly. He knows the ways of the world and how to talk to an unsuspecting forest-maid like this. His education is superior, and he is one of those trim young fellows apt to take a

woman's eye. Now you are rather a good-looking fellow, Conrad, but there is a little too much of the corsair about you, and she has lived long enough here to know you exactly as you are. And you don't think that your life is the most enticing in the world."

"Is that what you called me here to say?" said Conrad.

"Not at all. I called you here to inform you that the girl loves this Yankee fellow. I do not think she knows her own heart yet. But I have read human nature too long and too deeply to be deceived in this. I tell you she loves him."

"He may count himself a dead man if I penetrate the camp myself and kill him. Let the men encamp here. Pick out eight or ten of the best scouts and search for the trail. I will go out alone and look for it. See that Marian does not leave the camp."

"If she will go, I do not think I can stop her," said Verton.

"Let me speak a word with her before I go. If you find the trail, fire three guns. That will bring me back. Send Marian to me."

The girl came to him with downcast eyes. She did not know what he had to say, but partly guessed it.

"Marian," he said, "I am going to look for the camp of these hunters. Be assured that I shall find it. If I do, it remains with you to say what shall be the fate of its occupants."

"With me."

"With you. It is a long time since I saw you first. You were a winning creature then, and I felt a thrill in a heart long dead to human sympathy, as I lifted you to the saddle before me and pressed you to my breast. I have seen you grow up like a flower; I have taught you, and seen your mind expand; my love has grown up with you, and I will be set at rest. You complain of the life I lead."

"Yes, Conrad," she said, in a subdued tone, "I do."

"And you have good reason. I am willing to change this life, to sever forever from these wild associates, and go out into the world. I have wealth enough to make me welcome among men—for money, after all, is the power which moves the world."

"Ah, Conrad, if you would make this change!"

"Would you go with me?"

"Yes, Conrad."

"As my wife, I mean."

"No, no, no! as your sister. I love you in that way; I can never love you in any other. I will go with you to the world's end as your sister. I will love you always, but I cannot marry you."

He staggered like a man half-drunk and leaned against his horse for support. It was a rough awakening from a long life-dream. All his hopes were scattered in a moment by those sad words.

"You do not love me, then?"

"I am grateful to you, Conrad. You took me when a little child and made me what I am. In the midst of wickedness and doing it yourself, you taught me nothing but that which was good and pure. All that I am I owe to you. But I cannot forget what you have been."

"Change your purpose; say you will be my wife."

"I cannot do that."

"Then give me your reasons."

"I have given them."

"Then I will add another. This airy hunter, who saved your life, and who took you out of the hands of Jeff Rooter, has a warmer place in your heart than I have."

"At least, he never insulted me," said Marian, angrily.

"Indeed, Verton was right then."

"Verton is a villain; I have told you again and again not to trust him; he will do you some great wrong yet."

"No fear of that."

"He will betray you; I know that he is a villain to the heart's core. He has lied about me, it seems."

"I think not. But let us say no more of this. I swear never to rest until this dandy hunter is in my power; and when he is—"

The expression of his face told the probable fate of Dan, if by any chance he fell into his enemy's hands. He flung himself into the saddle and rode away. At length he reached a place where a path mounted the side of the hill; there he tied his horse, and looking at the pistols in his belt, he saw that they were capped. His knife was in its sheath, and the hilt of a long-bladed stiletto showed itself in the breast of his hunting-shirt. The path up which he climbed was an irregular one, and dangerous to unwary feet. But he had suspected the place to which the party of hunters had gone, and knew that he could approach it in this way without being seen. He had just drawn himself up to a platform of rock from which he had a view of the camp, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder and a voice said:

"What do you want here?"

He started to his feet. Dan Crowley, the man he had hated from his soul, stood before him. At first his hand fell upon his knife, and then he mastered himself with an effort.

"Ah, it is you, sir," he said. "You startled me at first."

"You have not answered my question," repeated Dan. "I asked you what you wanted here."

"I might ask you the same."

"Certainly—you might; and I might give you an honest answer. But as my question comes first, be so good as to answer me at once."

"Sdeath! I have as much right here as you—a better, in fact."

"That is no answer to my question."

"Then my answer is, attend to your own affairs, and let me attend to mine."

"That is speaking to the point; but, happily, I am attending to my business. Scoundrel, I know you! Thief, robber and murderer; consort of Indians and horse-thieves, you are in bad hands. Surrender, you disgrace to humanity! surrender, and thank my good-nature that I did not cut you down without question."

"I am glad this has come so soon," hissed Conrad, snatching a pistol from his belt; but Dan got in a blow with his left hand, which sent the rascal staggering. It was only for a moment, and then they closed.

If Dan Crowley had calculated upon an easy victory over Conrad Vesey, he reckoned without his host. The moment he felt the grip of that strong arm about his waist, he knew there would be a fight for it. Dan, an adept in every sort of violent exercise in the States, rarely had met his equal at wrestling. But Conrad was fully his match. Up and down the flat rock they tramped, their eyes gleaming, their teeth clinched, and their breathing short and quick. Neither of them saw that Ben Miffin and Jan had come down the mountain-side and were interested spectators of the struggle.

"I have you," said Dan.

"Wait," said Vesey. "You must win me before you wear me."

"I will do it soon."

"Then you must struggle for it," said Vesey. "I will make you rue the day that you wrestled with me."

"You don't know me, Will o' the Wisp," replied Dan, putting forth all his powers. "Look out for yourself."

They were well matched, but Dan, in making a fient, caught his foot in a projecting point of rock and staggered. Conrad threw his body forward to finish the struggle but, by a dextrous sleight, Dan turned him as they fell, and came down uppermost.

"Good boy," shouted Black Hills Ben. "That's right; stick the condemned critter. Stick him, Dan!"

But the wrist of Crowley's right hand was still encircled by the iron hand of Conrad.

"You have set your ruffians on me, coward," he hissed. "I'll die game."

"Rise," said Dan, freeing himself with an effort. "I take no unfair advantage."

Conrad was on his feet in a moment, and raising the knife above his head, made a tiger-like bound, and would have buried the steel in the unprotected bosom of his antagonist. The blow fell. But Ben's hand and eye never failed, and the knife was shattered into pieces against the silver-bound stock of the rifle, which he thrust between them. Then, whirling the rifle over his head, he knocked the ruffian senseless.

"Thar he lies, the condemned critter," he said. "Not the kind of an animile a man would like to meet without weepens. I'd like to finish the dirty hound."

"I hopes he deat'," said Jan.

"I hope not," said Dan. "Thank you for your timely aid, Ben. It saved my life."

"I wouldn't 'a' chained sp'ilin' this yer' rifle only for that," said Ben.

"What shall we do with him?"

"Keep him; he'll be a hostage for the good conduct of the rest. Ef they come at us, we'll put him out in front of the stockade an' let him feel the bullets first. Give me that thar lariat, Jan."

The Dutchman obeyed, and he cut it into three pieces. One of these he tied about the arms of their captive near the elbows. The second about his waist, to drive him by, and the third was kept for his feet when they reached the camp.

"Git up," said he; "don't fool; you ain't hurt so bad but you kin stand."

"Will o' the Wisp" rose sullenly. "What do you intend to do with me?" he said.

"You ar' my pris'ner," said Ben. "I'm julous you mean some devilment. I won't be sure, but that is what I think. Tennyrate, I've got ye, an' I mean to keep ye safe. Keep an eye on him, Jan, an' ef he goes to stir, shoot will through the head."

"I vatch him like von cat," said Jan; "of let him vool me."

"That's right. Don't. Now git on, you. Down that path."

Ben took the loose end of the lariat fastened about the waist of the captive, and drove him before him down the slope toward the camp. The inmates hailed their coming with wild shouts as they saw the captive. At the same moment Joe, who was on guard, shouted to some one who was coming to halt.

"I must come," replied a sweet voice, which Dan knew well.

Joe stood aside, and at that same moment the beautiful horse of Maid Marian cleared the low breastwork at a bound, and stood beside them. She started as she saw their prisoner, and beckoned to Dan to come to her.

"What has he done?" she said.

"He attempted my life, and we took him."

"Do you mean to harm him?"

"Not unless he attempts to escape."

"You took him in good time. The entire band are here, a hundred men in all, and they are searching high and low for you. I see you are prepared."

"They will have to fight for us," said Dan.

"Brave, but too rash. If they cannot take you in that way, they can besiege you and starve you out; or they can call in three hundred Indians to aid them. Whirling Breeze and a large company of his braves will be here to-morrow. I pray you, if escape is possible, to attempt it."

"How is it possible? No doubt they hold all the passes."

"You should have taken my advice before," she said; "I meant it honestly, and for your good. I come now to warn you to summon all your fortitude, and to fight bravely against the enemy, and save yourself if you can. I would ask you to surrender, but I fear you would not do that."

"You judge us rightly. What chance would we have of life if we yielded unless we join this band of professional murderers?"

"There is something else," she said, in a slightly tremulous voice. "I know my actions may, nay, *must* seem unwomanly—"

"To me?"

"You would, of course, deny it. I would have you and all here judge me as leniently as you can. I was not born for this. To be a companion of savage men, without the pale of society, fugitives from justice with the ban of the law upon their guilty heads. But blind fortune has made me what I am, and I cannot break the tie which binds me to them."

"Lady, will you hear me?"

"Let me finish. I am bound by a tie of gratitude to yonder man. I never knew until lately what he is. I did not believe it possible, for, savage as he is to his enemies, he is gentle to me."

"Are you his wife, lady?"

"His wife? No, no; never that tie. I have not time to tell you now. It is enough that my fortunes are linked with his, and I cannot forsake him. If I could turn him from this wicked life, it seems to me, I would be willing to die. Good-by. We may never meet again on earth, but I shall not forget you."

"Lady—"

"My name is Marian Delisle. Call me by my first name. I am Maid Marian to all the band."

"And Maid Marian, of Sherwood Forest, was not fairer than she of the Black Hills," said Dan.

"A truce. If I am Maid Marian, yonder man is no Robin Hood, nor are his followers such men as feasted in merry Sherwood. You see I know the history of the worthies to whom you would compare us. Let that pass. I have bidden you good-by."

"But not forever," cried Dan. "I will find you and know you better."

"No, never—never more! Think of me at my best. When you are gone from this, think sometimes of the poor girl who would have been a better woman if fate had not been too strong for her."

He would have detained her, but she turned her horse's head and put him over the breast-work again.

In turning she had dropped a small dagger, which he snatched from the ground and put into his bosom. As he rose, he saw the black eyes of the prisoner fixed upon him in speechless malignity.

"Come here," he said.

Dan walked slowly to his side.

"Give up the dagger. Curse you, do you think you can keep anything that belongs to her? I will have it if you hide it in your heart, for there I will dig for it."

"Come, no heroics," said Dan. "I do not propose to give up the weapon. It is all I have as a remembrance of a woman whom you keep with you, only by the strength of gratitude. You do not suppose she will fall in love with your character?"

"Give up the dagger, I say. Fool, hound, coward, liar! Untie my hands, and let us fight it out here, in the midst of your hired bullies, and I will put you where you will never entrap the heart of foolish girl again. You devil! You know you have me fast, but my time may come."

"Silence, sir. I am not fool enough to fight you. We have you safe. The time for dueling has gone by."

"Yes; with cowards."

"The day may come when you will find whether I am a coward or not, sir. It does not matter. In the mean time, keep a civil tongue in your head, or you may chance to suffer by it. If you disturb the camp I will have you gagged."

"Dan," said Ben, "come hyar."

The old trapper was standing on a point of rocks from which they had a view of the valley below. Dan hurried to his side. They could see the entire band gathered upon the plain, at the mouth of the pass, in conference. Just then Maid Marian joined them,

"They hev found us," said Ben.

"So it seems. Ha! Do you see there?"

He pointed to the south. And there, filing into the valley, they saw a band of warriors, larger than the force of white men on the plain. The reinforcement had come ahead of time.

"Whew!" said Ben. "Thet's Whirling Breeze. Now we ar' in fer it. Look out fer trouble to-day."

"Do you think they will attack us?"

"You bet. They won't do nothin' else. Eternal goslins, look at them Blackfeet! How many more? Swear to gracious ef I don't think thar's nigh two hundred of them."

The two parties met and exchanged greetings. These were hardly over when Verton detached himself from the company with a white flag in his hand, and came up the pass. Ben at once left his elevated position, and taking his rifle, called to Dan to accompany him, and ran down to the first barricade to meet the envoy. When Verton came in view, Ben was sitting on top of the barricade, in the most nonchalant manner possible, with his rifle across his knees, smoking a pipe.

"Hello, you thar," said Ben, in rather a cavalier manner. "What ar' you arter?"

"We claim this ground."

"Go to Halifax. An' ef Halifax ain't warm enough, go to the devil's kitchen an' make broth for him."

"You old ruffian, we do not come here to parley and badger words with you. As leader of the Free Rangers, I demand that you yield everything in your camp—traps, guns, ammunition, pelts and the like. You will be regarded as prisoners of war and your lives spared."

"You don't tell me! S'pose we ain't ekil to the task of throwin' ourselves away that fashion? What then?"

"We shall come and take you. If we do, and you kill any of our men, you need expect no quarter."

"What do you mean?"

"He means," said Dan, stepping to Ben's side, "that we shall put a rope around your captain's neck and string him up on the first sign of your attempt to force an entrance to our camp."

"Is your name Crowley?"

"Yes."

"Then I have a message for you. You have seen Maid Marian. She says that while in camp she dropped a cornelian ring, with a heart for a crest. I take it that you have the ring upon your little finger."

Dan drew off the ring.

"Give it to the lady with my compliments," said he. Verton went away.

"That was ycur own ring," said Ben in some surprise. "She didn't lose no ring."

"No," said Dan. "She has my ring; I have her dagger."

"Good enough, an' ef you hev yer way, you will have her as well. I kin see that in your face."

Dan smiled, and the old man answered by a broad grin, as he hurried back to the camp and returned directly, accompanied by his prisoner and Jan, who brought his rifle and ammunition.

Ben took a heavy hatchet in his hand and

climbed a small tree which grew close to the barricade. Once in the tree, he lopped off the twigs from a strong branch, leaving it in full view of the enemy as they came up the pass.

"Make a running noose in that lariat, an' put it over that devil's head, Jan!" said he.

Jan obeyed without a word.

"Now, toss it up hyar."

Jan did as directed. Up to this time Conrad had not spoken a word; but, as the rope was passed over the bough, he understood his danger.

"What are you going to do?" he gasped, beginning to be frightened.

"I reckon we are going to hang you ef yer friends down thar pitch into us. Ketch the end of this lariat, Dan."

When this was done, Ben dropped from his perch, and lifted the prisoner to the top of the barricade.

Ere long, several horsemen appeared in the pass. Beholding the perilous position of the captain, they paused and uttered various exclamations.

"What do ye mean?" shouted one of the horsemen. "Let the capt'in down ef ye want to live."

"We won't let him down, Tommy Turtle," cried Ben. "An' look you; you go back, every mother's son of you, or I'll push him off the barricade. Now git! Don't stay too long."

"But I want to talk with you, Ben," said Tommy Turtle. "We dont mean you no harm; but we don't want the capt'in hurt nuther. We ar' too fond of him. Thar ain't a man in yer party we've got any thing ag'in', unless it mout be one. The rest shan't be hurt. Ain't that so, Lieutenant Verton?"

"Certainly; no one shall be injured except that fellow Crowley."

"They are hot ag'in' you, Dan," whispered Ben. "It's got to be a fight, sooner or later, for they have a great likin' for this skunk we've got yer', cuss him."

"I do not know why they hate me," said Dan.

"Because the capt'in hates ye. Verton pretends to, but I don't believe it. Come, Tommy," he continued, raising his voice, "that cock won't fight. We know you too well, we do. Onc't you git us into yer hands, ye've got bad memories, an' would forgit all 'bout what you promised. Git 'way back!"

"Now look here, Ben, this won't do. You let the capt'in go; we must hev him."

"We ain't safe ef he goes; we kain't do that. Ar' ye goin'? Ef ye be, all right; ef not, I push him off; an' I'll do it now ef Nat Summers don't put back the rifle he's tryin' to cock behind yer back."

The man who had been detected in the attempt to get a shot at Ben on the sly, relinquished the design with a sheepish look.

"The durned pup sees everything," growled Tommy Turtle. "Don't try that on ag'in, Nat. You can't fool the old man a cent's wu'th. What a man he would be ef we c'u'd git him to j'ine us. I wish we only could. Capt'in?"

"What do you want, Turtle?"

"What kin we do? Give us orders."

"You must go back, boys," said Conrad.

"If you can think of some plan to get me out of the clutches of these fellows, do it."

"An' bear this in mind," said Ben: "the fu'st time we hear an alarm, I mean to shoot him right through the head."

"Good-by, capt'in," said Turtle. "We will try what we kin do."

As he spoke, the horsemen began to file out the pass. The present danger was over.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

THEY took the prisoner inside the barricade and bound him to a tree. Jan was placed on guard, and Ben paced up and down by the barricade, waiting for an attack, which he thought they might make in the night. Jan sat down in the doorway of the hut and laid his rifle across his knees.

The brigand saw that Jan was likely to go to sleep, and suffered him to do so. Jan lay upon the ground not far from the prisoner, sleeping soundly. An hour dragged by, and Conrad raised his head. He knew by the heavy breathing of the Dutchman that his senses were locked in slumber. The prisoner's feet were not bound, and rising to a sitting posture, he bent his head, and seizing with his teeth the hilt of a knife which protruded from his breast, he drew it from its sheath and dropped it over his shoulder within reach of his hands. Taking it in his left hand, holding the point up, he managed to insinuate the point into the knot which Ben had tied. The blade was a keen one, and the buckskin parted with a slight noise. He fell back immediately, fearing that Jan would awake, but he did not.

Opening the breast of his coat, from a secret pocket in the back he took out a small case containing two small bottles. From the smallest of these he took out the stopper and poured a little of the contents upon a handkerchief. This done, the unmistakable odor of chloroform began to speed through the hut. Rising to his knees, he crept to the side of Jan, and waved the handkerchief to and fro before his nostrils for a while, without touching his face. When satisfied that the subtle drug had done its work sufficiently to prevent the easy awakening of the victim, he pressed the handkerchief lightly on his nostrils, and held it there for several moments. The work was done at last, and Jan lay helpless beneath his hand.

The eyes of the man began to gleam and he clutched his knife viciously. He would have liked to plunge it to the hilt in the bosom of the sleeping man. But just as he half-raised the knife he heard the sound of coming feet. Cursing the comer heartily, he darted to his place and lay down in the same position as before, holding his hands behind him. The comer was Ben, who looked into the hut, and seeing the prisoner lying quietly on his back, concluded that he was asleep and did not disturb him. The great fear which haunted Conrad was that the old man would smell the chloroform and enter to find the cause. He clutched his knife firmly, and if Ben had entered then his life would have been in danger. But he remained at the door a moment, looking smilingly into the face of the sleeping Jan, and then went

back to his post. The moment he was gone the prisoner crept to the side of Dan, who was sleeping close at hand, and operated on him in the same manner as upon Jan.

As far as these two were concerned he was free already. But, the old man outside was the man to be feared the most. He hurried to the side of the hut opposite the barricade, and cut two heavy boughs, leaving a passage large enough for him to emerge. He crept out cautiously.

Half an hour after Ben again looked into the hut. Jan had fallen over on his back and was sleeping heavily. Dan was also asleep. But the prisoner was gone!

With a shout of rage, Ben sprung in and shook Jan roughly. The effects of the drug had nearly passed, but it was some moments before he was fully awake. The tumult Jan made aroused Dan, who started up.

"What is this?" he cried. "The prisoner gone?"

"Thanks to this durned Dutchman," growled Ben. "I mou't 'a' know'd he'd go to sleep. Don't you smell something queer?"

"Chloroform!" cried Dan. "We have been drugged."

"Put to sleep?"

"Yes."

"Pen," said Jan, "don't dell me dat der mans gits away because I gone to sleep. I nefer d'inks. I vorks pooty hard lately, unt I pees asleep before I knows. Vell, be gone. Cut off mine heat unt t'row it ous from der door. I no goot to nopoty now."

"Don't take it too hard, old man. Ye'r' to blame, but ef the durned purp meant to drug ye, he'd 'a' done it anyhow. What puzzles me is, how he got out of the hitch I put him in. They mou't well call him 'Will-o'-the-Wisp'."

"He is gone. We may look for an attack now, since he is safe."

"Hark to that," said Ben, raising his hand for silence. A tremendous shout, which filled the valley from end to end, was heard in the direction of the robbers' camp.

"He's jest j'ined 'em now," said Ben. "Thar's whar he got out. He's took the back track, climbed the mountains, an' went down the path whar ye had the fight with him, to keep cl'ear of this old man. Never mind. I'll hev him yit, before I go to grass."

"I hope you may. Let us prepare for an attack. We need another man here. Let Jan go back for Indian Joe."

Jan ran off, eager to atone for the evil he had unwittingly done, and came back directly with the half-breed. They had hardly reached the barricade when a horseman appeared in the gap. He went down at the crack of Ben Miffin's rifle, while the stern old man began to reload his piece, without a smile or frown on his face.

"He brung it on hisself," said he. "They won't come up so brash after that."

He was right. Awed by the fate which had overtaken their companion, those who followed him paused and drew together. In this position they took the fire of the other three rifles. All were good shots, and the foremost men paid dearly for being in the forlorn hope. There was a backward movement, and at the same time

Jeff Rooter and the others came up on the run, eager to take part in the conflict.

"Why did you come?" demanded Dan. "You would have done better to stay at camp."

"We wanted a hand in the fun," said Jeff Rooter. "Thar ain't a man hyar thet ain't lost something, one time or another, by the hands of these same varmints. So don't drive us back; now don't."

"Stay, since you are here. Ned, I detail you and Jan to load the spare rifles for us. In that way we shall always keep two charges ready. When a man fires, give him another rifle. Get ready. They are gathering for a rush. Thank fortune, they can only come three at a time."

Coming on with wild shouts, the robbers were met by the determined rifles of the hunters, and again driven back with loss. Several wounded men lay groaning in the pass. Three were slain outright and a number of others had been barked to a considerable extent.

"They are game," said Conrad; "I should like to have that old man Miffin in my band. He is a gallant fellow. Tell Marian not to go beyond the range of those rocks."

The brave girl was there, running from one wounded man to another, giving them drink from a canteen she carried in her hand. As fast as they fell, some of the men carried them to the shelter of the rocks and placed them in her hands. Rough, bearded men, most of them ruffians and murderers, looked up in her face with a smile of thanks before they closed their eyes forever on the world. The combat was at its height. Shrieks, cries of agony or rage, and terrible battle shouts, rung in her ears. She had been in scenes of battle before, but never in one where the rangers were as sturdily met as now.

She saw the tall form of Dan at times, reared above the barricade as he made ready to fire. His face, flushed with the ardor of battle, looked grand to her. She began to comprehend that she thought more of this man than she would care to show.

The rangers were crowding forward now, but were beaten back before the fatal rifles of the hunters. Conrad whispered a low order in the ear of Jasper Verton, and hurried away. From that time there was a lull in the battle for half an hour. A silence which had reigned for a few moments was suddenly broken by a terrible battle-cry—a cry which made the woods ring. At the same moment a band of nearly two hundred Blackfeet, with Will o' the Wisp and Whirling Breeze at their head, *came down upon their rear!*

Assailed in front and rear, they stood bravely up to the work and fought with a determination worthy of a better fate. It was vain. Tom died upon an Indian spear; Joe was desperately wounded by a rifle-ball; Jeff Rooter lay wounded on the sod; Dan, though hurt in two places, still stood up.

But Jan and Ben, unwounded, holding their clubbed rifles with steady hand, fought desperately, seconded by Dan. The great body of the enemy closed in upon them, and Dan was borne to the earth. Conrad stood above him with a dagger in his hand. That had been Dan Crowley's last moment of life, but that help came,

The dagger was raised, and he had lifted his feeble hand to ward off the blow, when Marian darted in and seized the knife-hand at the wrist.

"This is a brave deed, Conrad Vesey! Have you sunk so low that you will slay a wounded man?"

He looked abashed.

"I was heated by the battle," he said, sulkily.

"I am glad you came between."

"Listen to me, Conrad. If one of these prisoners is harmed through your means, be sure of this; you will never see my face again."

"I have nothing to say in the matter, beyond my own vote. How many are killed? Where are the Dutchman and Ben Miffin?"

"Fighting yet," she said, looking up. "Oh, save that brave old man."

Just as the girl cried out to save them, the two went down under the determined efforts of their assailants. Half a dozen tomahawks were leveled at them, but a lithe young warrior, with a handsome face and form, darted in between them and their leveled weapons.

"Back, warriors of the Blackfeet! Back, sons of the pale-face! No harm must be done to such brave men as these. The Panther, son of Whirling Breeze, has said it, and he will keep his word. These prisoners are mine."

"Have your own way, Panther; we don't care for these two; they are in good hands," said Conrad. "Besides, they were taken by our red brothers. The rest of the prisoners are mine."

"It is well," said Whirling Breeze, the chief who led the Blackfeet. "My brother is just to Indians."

They spent the rest of the day in collecting the traps and peltries scattered about. Jan and Ben looked on in silence, and noted that there was one *cache* which they had failed to find.

"It seems to me that there were more furs than this," said Conrad.

"You don't seem to remember that it's mighty early in the season, Mister Man," said Ben. "We ain't *trapped* so much ez hunted. We was hired to hunt."

"True," said Conrad. "It is not so strange, after all. I want to make a proposition to you. You see how you are situated. It will be next to impossible for you to get away from Whirling Breeze, and the probability is he will roast you. Now, you are too old a man, and too brave a one, to be finished in that way. I want two such men as you and your companion in my band. I give you the opportunity of joining us. Whirling Breeze would do anything for me."

"What would I be called on to do?" asked Ben.

"A little of everything—much the same kind of work you have seen us do. It is profitable. In less than two years, if you are saving, you will have enough to make you comfortable. What do you say?"

"I say that you ar' a dirty hound, an' ef I wa'n't a pris'ner I'd bu'st ye right in the snout fer sayin' thet to me. I j'ine a lot of thieves an' murderers thet ain't fit to live on the face of the 'arth! I make one of sech a gang! Now, look yer'; I've bin a man all my life thet tried to live my life out f'ar an' squar'. I'm a free trapper,

I've made the broad prairies my home, an' no man ever come to me an' said sech a thing afore. Git out! I don't want to look at ye. Ye ain't fit to live."

Conrad left him in a rage, and went out to the other side of the camp. There he saw a sight which nearly drove him mad. Dan had been so wounded as to be unable to walk, and was sitting under a tree; and near him, seated on a great stone, was Maid Marian. The eyes of Vesey dilated, and shot forth gleams of light. He made a few rapid strides and seized her by the shoulder.

"Will you come with me? I wish to talk with you," he said.

"Certainly. Any duty you can claim of me which a brother might have, I am ready to grant."

He led her apart from Dan, who had been boiling with indignation during the interview.

"You think me harsh," said Vesey, as they stood alone. "I do not design to be so. You know my nature, dear girl. When I love, it is with a power passing the love of women; and it is for your good I seek to separate you from this young man. What do you know of him?"

The new line of tactics rather disconcerted her. She was compelled to say that she knew nothing of Dan but what she had seen of him for the last three weeks.

"And is it just in you, Marian, to throw aside the passion of years for the love of one who may not care for you?"

"You assume too much, Conrad, when you say I would show love for one who made no return."

"Does it not show love to follow him from camp to camp; to warn him of danger at every opportunity, to send for a ring from him?"

"Oh, Conrad!"

"Silence. You sent for his ring. You know it."

"I did, Conrad, but—"

"You wear it still," he persisted.

"When I used that subterfuge to get something from him for a keepsake, I believed honestly that I should never see his face again. I acknowledge that I care for him more than any other man, for he has saved my life."

"And did not I?"

"I have tried to repay you for that," she said. "I give you my confidence."

"Away with it! What do I care for that? I have had enough nonsense. Now listen to me. I have not waited all these years for you, to be balked at this stage of the game, nor will I be. Look to yourself. Mine you shall be, by fair means or foul."

"You begin to show your true colors, Conrad Vesey. I will never be your wife."

"You shall, by heaven."

"We shall see. Beware of me. You have trained me up in your way of life, and we shall see whether or no I will do justice to your teachings."

"Do you think I fear you, girl? I am determined to make you mine. For the present, I leave you. But it will not be for long."

He walked hastily away. Directly after a man rose from the shelter of the rocks behind which he had been lying and walked toward

her. It was the lieutenant of Vesey, Jasper Verton. She heard his step and turned. There was a leer upon his face which she did not like.

"And how is Maid Marian to-day?" he said. "We have done our work well here in the Black Hills."

"Too well, Jasper Verton. I am sorry for it," she said.

"Oh, their time had come. You remember the old saw, 'What will be, will be.' It was their fate to fall here, as it may be ours to die here or in another place. Can you spare me a moment of your company? I have something to say to you."

"Say on."

"You are short with me. To be plain, I have overheard your conversation with my worthy captain."

"Ah!"

"You are startled."

"So you are one of the kind to lie hid under the rocks and listen to a private conversation. I thought better of you than that."

"No doubt. We will not say in what manner I happened to overhear your conversation. It is enough for me that I *did* overhear it, and now tell you of it. I see you have no great affection for the captain. I am glad of that. Now, I wish to be your friend, Miss Marian."

"I am willing to be friendly. But your manner of obtaining information is not creditable, I assure you."

"Perhaps not. I wanted to say to you that if I can be of service to you, I will be ready. If you ask so much of me as to put yonder ruffian under the sod, I will do it."

"Who do you mean?"

"Vesey, 'Will o' the Wisp,' Markman, or what you will. If you want him put out of the way, I am the man to do it."

"Put out of the way!" she said, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Put to sleep; sent down below; killed, in point of fact," said he, coolly. "The fellow has gone to the length of his rope. Rather put him out of sight, than leave him here, an eyesore to you."

"Wretch!" she cried. "Do you come here with such a cold-blooded proposition as that? For what do you take me, rascal? Not only do I spurn your infamous proposition, but I think it no more than just to denounce you to Conrad."

"You would not do that, surely?" he muttered, turning pale. "I meant it for your good."

"How low I must have sunk in the eyes of all if such a proposition as this can be made to me for my *good*. The proposition to kill the man who has reared me, when he might have left me to perish. If I had a weapon in my hand, I do not think you would live to insult another by such an offer."

"I beg your pardon," he said, humbly. "I was betrayed to this through too great zeal to do you service. I hope this may not be used to my discredit."

"Not if you truly repent."

"I do, indeed. I was mad, Marian. I love you. The ground you tread is sacred to me. Let me tell you how I love you."

"Silence! Do not go on. It seems to me that all the men in this camp are going mad together."

"May I not even tell my love?"

"It is hopeless."

The man stood with bent head, so that she could not see the savage flash of his eyes. In this position he remained for a moment, and then looked up. There was not a trace of passion in his face.

"That dream is over," he said. "You will shake hands with me, I hope."

She did so, glad that he took it so easily. But she was mistaken. In that moment she had made an enemy more fierce than even Conrad Vesey could be, for, though he hated all who loved her, at least, he never hated her. But Verton, who was of a vindictive nature, would have been glad to see her lying dead at his feet. He went away, and drew Conrad aside with a horrified face.

"I am afraid to speak it, Conrad. But there is something you ought to know."

"Do not fear. Out with it, man."

"You will not be angry with me?" he said.

"No. Go on."

"A few moments ago I met Marian among the rocks yonder. She was very angry at something; that I could see in her face as I came up."

"Have you a mind to do me a service, Verton?" she said.

"Of course I told her yes."

"I will teach Conrad Vesey that I have some power in this camp," she said. "I told him so before, and he shall know it. Do you care for me enough to put him under the sod?"

"Stop!" thundered Vesey. "Who said that?"

"Marian Delisle."

"You must think me a fool to come to me with a story like that."

"Then go your own way, Conrad Vesey. I thought to do you a service, but it seems you do not care for such."

"But what is this you impute to Marian Delisle? It is terrible. I would believe you, for you have always been true to me; but Marian never liked you. Verton, will you swear by the holy saints that this is true?"

Verton readily took the oath. He would have sworn to anything then in his hate of Marian.

"And so she is as far gone as that?" muttered Conrad. "I love her, God knows how much. I doubt if this fellow whom she loves cares a pin's weight whether she lives or dies. I will punish her. Conrad Vesey will be true to himself. Verton!"

"My captain?"

"Will you be true to me in this business of mine? I must do something to repay this cruel girl in kind. Will you stand by me?"

"Through blood and fire. She will deny it, of course," said Verton.

"I shall not accuse her, I think. Let it work itself out. I am not myself to-day. My brain is in a whirl. I think we will begin upon these two hunters. It would be a fine thing to burn them before her."

"It would be better to burn the wounded fellow, Crowley. And perhaps this Jeff Rooter."

"His time will come. The two hunters are together in yonder hut, I think."

"Yes."

"Ben Miffin refused to join us yesterday. Perhaps he will like it better at the stake."

With these words he turned back toward the hut in which Ben was confined.

CHAPTER X.

IN FOR IT.

BEN was half lying on the floor of the rude hut. He was not alone, for beside Jan, who sat near him, there stood the young warrior who had saved his life in yesterday's battle. The young chief was speaking.

"My father has done wrong," said the Panther. "Why did he not listen to the voice of the White Spirit and go away?"

"We were going pooty soon," said Ben. "I'm right sorry we waited so long."

"The eyes and ears of the Blackfeet are always open. They heard the call of their friends from afar and came. White man, years ago you saved my life. The Panther cannot forget."

"I remember it. 'Twas at the time when Jules Damand was here."

"The Double Tongue. Whirling Breeze is just. He will do what is right, and he will not be too hard upon the man who saved his son. But he cannot do a wrong to the great nation."

"My son speaks well," said Ben. "I am a withered pine. It matters not how soon I fall to the ground an' am seen no more. When do we leave this place?"

"The Blackfeet go to-morrow. Good-by. Panther will see you again."

The young chief walked away. Ben crawled to the door and looked into the Indian camp. He saw that it was really a hunting party, but the hunters of the Blackfeet are easily turned aside by the chances of plunder. A number of women were in the camp, hurrying here and there, laughing and talking. Jan looked at them in considerable astonishment.

"I nefer sees sech vomans 'n all my life," whispered Jan. "Dey make more noise dan a windmill. Off dey vash any of dem mine, I would make 'em shut oop."

"Ye kain't stop an Injun woman's tongue nohow," said Ben. "Now, thar was my wife. I've seen women before now thet could *blow*, but whew! Her tongue run like the machinery of a fu'st-class ingine in a quartz mill. 'Twa'n't very pleasant nuther. I c'u'dn't stand it myself."

"I not likes dat kind off vomans," said Jan. "Dey no goot."

"I've allus thought," said Ben, "thet my wife 'u'd turn up ag'in some time and go fer me. I've been afraid of it a long time. I guess I'm pretty safe now."

"Vy?"

"Because they'll probably roast us in the morning. I kin see blood in their eyes, every man of 'em."

"Now ton't, Pen. *ton't*! I can't sthand such dalk ash dat. Ceom, don't be volin'. Vat you means py talking dat vay all de dimes? Roast

a mans? I nefer hears such t'ings vile I lifs. So ton't you say dot no more."

"I kain't help it. I must speak the truth anyhow. I judge thar ain't anythin' Blackfeet like so well as a roasted Dutchman. They don't go so heavy on a tough old trapper like me, but roast Dutchman is the'r best holt."

"Now, look here, Pen Miffin; I won't sthand any such nonsense. I'm ash goot ash anypotty, and I von't be dalked mit dat vays py anypotty. Dey nefer roast anypotty. Dat ish all dalk."

"Hev yer own way; hev yer own way. It don't make no difference. Ye'll make jest ez good a fry. An' talkin' of thet, I sh'u'd think they'd be a-pickin' up lightwood round here som'er's to build the fires. I judge it's the'r best holt to hev it ready an' not waste time."

"Vell, off I vash not tied mit my hants unt feet I vould smash you right square mit der mout'. Dat ish vat I vould do."

"No ye wouldn't, Dutchy," said Ben. "No ye wouldn't. It's lucky fer ye thet I'm tied, or I would mash ye. Yes I would. Yes indeedy. Take care what ye say."

Nothing could quell the pugnacious spirit of the trapper. His eyes roamed over the grim faces of the Indians as if desirous of finding one to whom a fight would be a pleasure. No doubt he could be accommodated in short order if required, but no time was given to get up the quarrel. The two men were hurried into a lodge again and left tied. Half an hour after the lodge-curtain was lifted and Conrad Vesey appeared. He had thrown away his cap and wore instead a feather head-dress, after the manner of a Blackfoot chief. Ben sat upon the ground with his back against the lodge-pole, looking defiance at the intruder. He folded his arms and looked down on the two prisoners with an expression of malignant pleasure. Neither of the prisoners spoke a word.

"Good-day, my very good friends," said he.

"Now see yer'," said Ben. "Wedon't want anythin' to say to you, Conrad Vesey. You better go. You dare not come to say what you did this morning. My hands ar' tied now, but ez sure ez ye try thet on, jest so sure I take ye by the throat an' choke the life out of ye, when I git loose."

"Scoundrel! Do you threaten me? You do not know my power here."

"Yes I do. Ye kin hev me roasted at the stake ef ye like. I know that right well. But what does it matter? A man can only die once."

"I came to say to you that it is best for you to prepare for the torture. Put no trust in the Panther. He would help you if he could, but his power is only limited after all. You must burn."

"Let it come," said Ben, stoutly. "I have looked on death before."

"You are right. And to-day you shall look on it for the last time. Maid Marian shall stand by and see you die."

"You scoundrel! You have lived the life of a wolf, and like a wolf you will die. I do not fear you. If I must die, there ain't a man in the Black Hills more ready. Ez fer you, I've got a word to say."

"Say on."

"You are doin' this fer the love of a woman. Ye'r' a fool. That ain't the way to win a girl like Marian. Let her come; let her see my death, and she will go away bating you like death. I think she begins to hate you now."

"Silence!" shouted Vesey, "or I will cut you down where you stand."

"I won't be silent," said Ben.

Vesey drew a knife and rushed at the speaker. At this moment the Panther darted in and struck him down with a hatchet.

"Dog!" he shouted. "A Blackfoot woman would not strike a prisoner unless at the torture. What do you here?"

"Good blow!" said Ben. "Hit him ag'in. Now I've got the chaine, I mean to give him a piece of my mind. He's a low-lived sneaking purp. He ain't got no heart. A rattlesnake hez more. I'll go my bottom dollar he kin squirm like a snake."

Conrad sprung up. There was a red mark on his head from which the blood was trickling slowly to the ground. He took out a piece of cloth from his pocket and bound it about the wound. The blood soon changed the color of the cloth completely. He wiped it from time to time with his fingers, and they became stained by the flowing tide. A more horrible picture is seldom seen. He stole out of the hedge like a bloody specter, leaving the Panther alone with the prisoners.

"Be of good heart," he said. "My father loves me and will do much for me. I will save you if I can."

With these words he left the hut, and for a few moments not a sound was heard. Shortly after they were taken from the hut and again tied to trees. Ben was glancing quickly from side to side, when he heard a shrill cry and felt a pair of bony hands seize him. He turned with an exclamation of surprise, which changed to horror as he saw who it was. A middle-aged Indian woman, with a hooked nose, keen black eyes, and a shrill voice, was the person who had claimed his attention.

It was no other than his much-feared and long-neglected Indian spouse, the Green Snake.

Ben emitted one long, shrill whistle of astonishment as he recognized her and struggled to free his arms from her grasp. But she had lost her white chief too long to yield him lightly.

"Gone long time, Strong Buffalo. Come back now. Glad to see you. Heart very sad dis long time. Weep rivers of water."

"Durn my buttons ef it ain't the Green Snake!" cried poor Ben. "Git out. What d'ye hang to me fur? I guess I've been away from ye long enough fur ye to git another husband, ain't I?"

"No husband come," replied the Green Snake. "'Fraid to take away squaw of Strong Buffalo. He great chief. Love his squaw. Come back, find 'nother brave got her, kill 'nother brave. 'Nother brave no want. Git plenty wife he own. Let Green Snake be."

"I wish the Lord they hedn't been so durned squeamish about it," said Ben. "Come. Don't be so blamed affectionate. I ain't used to it. Git out. Wimmen don't hang on to warriors at the stake."

"No burn. Green Snake go to Whirling Breeze. Beg husband's life. Never let him go till he say he no burn."

"Don't do it," said Ben. "By Jinks, I'd jest ez li've burn ez not. 'Tain't much when you get used to it. Durn it, no. It's *fun*; *crack* fun. A little fire an' a good deal of *water* go a great ways."

"No burn, tell you," persisted Green Snake. "Save you, self. Go now to Whirling Breeze."

Ben hesitated. Death itself was preferable to again suffering the Green Snake to get him in her clutches, but might he not make use of her in getting free? He thought it over and told her to go away for the present and come to him in a half-hour. Green Snake came promptly at the time.

"How kem ye hyar?" demanded Ben. "When I left the Crows ye were thar, all right."

"We went out on a hunting party. Whirling Breeze killed all the braves and took us prisoners. I am a Blackfoot now. I hate the Crows. I love the Blackfeet. But husband no come till now."

"I'm in a pooty fix," muttered Ben, fairly sweating with agony. "Ef she gits me, I'm a ruined man forever. I must git cl'ar of her somehow. An' at the same time— Green Snake?"

"Yes, Strong Buffalo. My ears are open."

"An' yer mouth too, most of the time," grumbled Ben. "Anyhow, come hyar. I want ye to go to Whirling Breeze an' claim me. Don't let up on him."

Green Snake started to go.

"Holt on," said Ben. "Wait a jiff. Let me run the matter over. I want to think ef I've got any chaine to git away after I've done the deed. I don't perpose to stay hyar with her, ef I kin git away. But I'm afraid I'm a goner. 'Tisn't much to git burnt. I believe I'll resk it."

"Dink off me, Pen," said Jan.

"Holt on!" said Ben. "I've got it. Say, Green Snake. Ye never relished me much anyway. What would ye think of thet thar chap fer a husband?"

"Big brave," said Green Snake, nodding approvingly. "Good!"

"Mebber ye'd jest ez li've change. Take Jan an' let them do what they durn please with me."

"Dat ain't fair!" shouted Jan, in mortal terror. "I nefer does dat so long as I life. I not likes Injun voomans. Dake her yourself."

"Don't be so bashful, Jan. Don't allow yer feelin' ag'in robbin' a friend of a good thing to influence ye. Think of the stake an' the fire, the arrers an' bullets, an' take this blusbin' female to yer buzzum—an' ef ye don't wish ye'd got a red-hot stove instid, I lose my guess. Oh, git out! Don't *thank* me. It's all right. Take her, my boy, an' take my blessin' with her."

"I nefer cakes no sooch voomans, I dinks I'd yoost as li've tie ash do dat. No, dake her away. Vat! Didn't I tell Katrine Schooner ash I would marry her ven I comes pack from der Vest?"

"That don't make any difference. Marry Katrine when ye go back. Mebbe the Green Snake will let ye go. Mebbe she won't. I judge it's more the last than the fu'st."

"What I do?" said Green Snake. "Mus' hab husband somehow. If one, all right. If other, jess as good. All same."

This accommodating proposition did not find favor in the eyes of Jan, who shrunk from her approaches.

"It's to save yer life," said Ben.

"I don't cares nottings 'bout it. I don't want to save life. I von't haf her," shouted Jan.

"Ye hear him, Green Snake. Then go an' claim me. I s'pose I've got to do it."

The woman darted away, and shortly after they heard her assailing Whirling Breeze with all sorts of clamorous demands for the surrender of her husband. It may as well be known that the Green Snake was a sort of elephant in the Blackfoot village. They had taken her, and did not know what to do with her. None of the braves wanted her for a wife, on account of her bitter tongue, which no personal danger could deter her from using freely on all occasions. The arguments she advanced were conclusive to the Indian mind. Ben was her husband. There was no one to keep the lodge-fire bright. Let him go free and there would be another lodge in the village.

Whirling Breeze took her by the hand, and led her to the tree to which the prisoners were bound, back to back.

"Wife?" said Whirling Breeze in a questioning tone, pointing at the Green Snake. Ben hesitated a moment, fearing to commit himself, and finally said "Yes," in a very doubtful tone of voice.

"Husband?" said the chief, pointing to Ben.

"Yes," said the Green Snake, promptly.

Whirling Breeze cut the cords which bound him to the tree, and thus addressed him:

"You are now a Blackfoot. While you remain with us and do not attempt to escape, it is well. When you try to escape you are again a white man, and we will kill you."

"What ar' ye goin' to do with my friend?" said Ben.

"Big man, eh?"

"Yes."

"Let him be Blackfoot too, if he will. It is better than killing. My son loves the Strong Buffalo well, and he hates Conrad. Let Strong Buffalo beware of him."

"I'll do that," said Ben. "Let my friend go."

The chief cut the cords which bound the Dutchman, and he was at liberty. Conrad saw the action with anger, but just then it was not his cue to interfere. He had not even attempted to avenge the blow the Panther had dealt him. That revenge was allowed to sleep for the present.

Ben was standing by himself, and Green Snake at a little distance, endeavored to attract his attention. He paid no attention to the telegraphic signs she used, and she came near and shouted in his ear. He jumped as if stung by a snake.

"Oh, I forgot. What the deuce do you want?"

"Ah-ha. Runaway," she screamed. "I was the daughter of a Crow chief. Warriors fought for my hand. And I, who might have been the squaw of Big Head, chief of a Crow village, became your squaw. You are a coward."

"Oh, shet up," said Ben. "Ain't it enuff that I allow ye ar' my wife, but ye must holler it to every one in camp? Git out!"

"Oh, snake in the grass!" yelled the irate female. "Dog of a pale-face. The medicine-man put cramps in your bones. You will cry like a little child. Bah! I spit at you."

"Don't go on so, Snakey. 'Tain't no use, I tell ye," said Ben.

"And where is there a wretched woman who has a husband who does not love her? Leave me, before I tear the eyes out of your head, and throw them to the dogs."

"I know'd it," said Ben. "I know'd I couldn't stand this yer. I orter be burnt twice over, fer givin' up a good thing when I had it. Burn-in' would only last a little while, an' ye kain't bet a cent on this. What ef I should hev to stay with her a month? I'd be a dead man long afore thet time. Anyway, thar's a chaine. They'll let me go out on a buffler-hunt, mebbe, and thar's the chaine of gittin' stamped to death. That's a good way. I'll try thet, ef she gits too hard on me."

"Ah, wretched one that I am!" said the Green Snake. "Oh, sad being! The husband in whose lodge I must sit and make the fire bright, cares not for me! He hears my cries, he sees my tears, and he laughs! He is cruel as death! He hates me!" Then changing her tone suddenly: "I will tear out the eyes of the man who has insulted the daughter of a Crow chief. Let me show you that I have the heart of a brave in my bosom."

And if Ben had not departed in hot haste, there is reason to believe she would have been as good as her word. As it was, she attacked poor Jan, who could not get out of her way, and pulled out a double handful of hair.

"Ah-ha! wretch! companion of the miserable man who does not love his wife!"

"Git ous!" shouted Jan. "Vat ter tuyvel ye mean? I am not your huspants. Dat ish him vat ish running yonter. So help me ash I vould not marry you off you vas wort' a hundred million tollars in money."

She made another dash at his hair, and Jan fled incontinently, following his companion. Two or three young Indian women, who saw the fracas, laughed heartily and showed their white teeth. Jan overtook Ben near the center of the camp, out of breath.

"I'd yoost ash soon fight another crizzly bear ash to marry dat vooman," said he. "Have I got any hair mit de pack off mine heat?"

"Never mind, Jan; bear it to-day, and to-morrow may see us somewhar else. I've got an idee. They'll watch us pooty clust, but not so clust as ef we war reg'lar pris'ners. If we get to the hills, I'll save Dan Crowley, or die a-tryin'."

"I does anything to git away vrom de vomans vat bulls mine hair. Ach! ter tuyvel dake der Green Snake!"

The night came on. Dan Crowley lay wounded in the other hut. He had cunningly misrepresented the extent of his hurt, and was really in good condition, and on the alert for anything to turn up. In the middle of the night, he was startled by feeling a cold hand pressed upon his mouth. He would have cried out, but that a

voice whispered in his ear the word "Ben." He understood it then; it was the old guide. "Come!" he whispered. Dan rose and followed him without a word. They passed stealthily through the recumbent groups of robbers, picking their way carefully without a sound. Ben took the lead, Jan came next, and Dan brought up the rear.

Ben knew the ground well, but that did not prevent meeting a guard. A leveled rifle menaced them, and a voice cried out to halt. There was no time to dally, and Ben knocked the ruffian down without scruple. Then, taking the hand of Dan in his, he hurried on until they were fairly on the mountain-side.

"Take your ease now," said Ben. "They ain't fools enough to foller us byar."

"What do you propose to do? I must ask the question, for I will never leave this region until I have seen Marian again."

"Trust me," said Ben. "Ef I ain't mistaken, to-morrow night the Prairie Rangers will be swept from the airth. Foller me."

CHAPTER XI.

A THUNDERBOLT AND A CALM.

A TERRIBLE confusion reigned in the camp of the robbers. The man who had been knocked down staggered to his feet, yelling like a maniac. The whole band, Indian and white, mingled, and cried out in rage. The Indians were especially angry: but, what words can paint the ire of the Green Snake, when she found that her perfidious husband had again given her the slip? Conrad sought out Whirling Breeze, with eyes full of rage.

"Chief, see the end of the foolishness which induced you to trust that old fox, Ben Miffin."

"My brother does not like what I have done," said the Whirling Breeze. "How can he better it? His own prisoner is gone."

"Let Will-o'-the-Wisp speak to a man who fears him not," said the Panther. "If our prisoners have escaped, is it anything to him? Let him look to his own."

"You crow well, young chicken," said Conrad, looking at the young chief with a moody brow. "If I do not cut your comb within a week, say that my knife is dull. I do not forget a blow."

"We will stay here no longer than the morning," said Whirling Breeze. "My brother is angry at those who are lords of the prairie. If he wants the help of the Blackfeet, let him come to them."

At early morning the chief gathered his band, took his share of the spoils, and rode away. Conrad was not ill-pleased to see him go. He had a plan in his head which the chief might have interfered with. The moment he was gone, he called to one of his desperadoes, a small, lean old man, evidently a Spaniard.

"Gaspard," he said, "take my horse and ride for your life. Find the priest, Father Sala—you know where he is likely to be at this time. Bid him mount, and come to me without a moment's delay."

The man knew his master too well to hesitate. In five minutes he was speeding out of the pass, leading a horse by the bridle. The leader smiled, and turned toward the door of the little *marquee*

which was always carried with the band for the use of Maid Marian. She stood in the doorway. He laid his hand lightly on her arm, and led her into the *marquee*.

"So your lover is gone," said he. "It seems that he cared little for you, since he deserted you."

"Better I never looked upon his face again, than that he should remain in your hands," she said.

"You are bold," he replied. "Then you do not deny that you love the fellow?"

"No; why should I deny it, even to you? He is at least a gentleman."

"It seems hard to me that Marian Delisle should sink so low as to love unasked," he sneered. "He never told you that he loved you."

"That is false."

"When?"

"While I 'tended him, wounded."

"Ha! events march rapidly, then. I see that I must be hasty to secure my bride. Marian Delisle, you are fallen low, even in my esteem. I will marry you, not because I love you as I did, but in pursuance of a vow. You conspired with Jasper Verton to take my life."

"I?"

"You! Do not deny it. He took an oath by all the holy saints that you proposed to him my murder—to 'put me under the sod'—those were the words. Oh, Marian, I loved you dearly, bad man as I am. But you shall be mine, and when we are married I will humble your proud head as low in the dust as you would have laid mine."

"Stop! You say that Jasper Verton swore that I proposed your murder?"

"He swore it on the holy saints."

"Dare you set him before my face?"

"I dare."

"Then let it be done. From this, indeed, I will clear myself, whatever may be my after fate."

"I will call him."

He went to the door and called Verton. He came in with a hesitating step, and his hand in the bosom of his coat. He looked at the ground, for he feared to face the eyes of Marian.

"Jasper Verton," she said, "look at me."

"What do you want?" he said, without raising his head. "I can hear you."

"I am accused of a hideous crime of which you know I am not guilty. Dare you face me and say that lie is true?"

"I dare."

"Then look me in the face and say it. If you do, I will marry this man without a murmur."

If she had studied for years for a test which he could not bear she could never have chosen a stronger one. He remained silent with bowed head, and that stealthy hand still in the bosom of his coat.

"What means this?" cried Conrad. "Have you lied to me, Verton?"

"He proposed the murder himself, and said he loved me!" cried Marian.

"Another?" cried Conrad. "Fool! Take your death!"

The hand of Verton sprung from his bosom at the word, and two pistols were leveled. Con-

rad's aim was true, and Jasper Verton, shot through the head, bounded into the air and fell dead. Marian ran to lift his head, but he was gone.

"I am sorry I spoke. Oh, Conrad, what have you done?"

"I have killed a vile traitor. Touch him not. I am glad you are absolved from this stigma, my darling. I am your lover again. But, having sent for the priest, the marriage shall go on."

"It shall not," she said.

"It shall."

She laid a hand upon the forehead of the dead man.

"I swear, by the blood you have shed so un-pityingly, that I will die sooner than be your wife, Conrad Vesey!"

"Then my purpose must be carried out. I have sent for Father Sala. You know him well enough to be sure that no protestations on your part will move him in any way. He will marry us, be assured. Ho, there! come in, some of you."

Several of the men who had heard the pistols and come to the door, but had not dared to enter, obeyed the summons.

"What has he done?" asked one.

"He attempted my life, and was a traitor to the band," said Conrad. "I will prove it in the next council. Take him out and bury him. Whatever wealth he possessed will be divided."

The men took up the body and carried it out.

"Be ready at four o'clock. At that time you will be married," the brigand chief said, and followed the men.

Calling the band together, he told them to march for their old camp at that time. He appointed a new lieutenant in the place of Verton, and sat down to wait for the coming of Gaspard and the priest. They were on hand half an hour before the time, and came at once to the captain. The priest was a tall, savage-looking fellow, with a sensual face. He greeted Conrad with a light laugh, ill becoming his priestly office.

"I cannot speak to you now, Father Sala. I must get the men in motion. Gaspard, go to Lieutenant Turtle and tell him to march at once."

The freebooters rode into the defile and were seen no more. At the same time the leader turned into the *marquee*, followed by the priest and Gaspard. Marian rose at their entrance, pale as death.

"You do not mean to carry out your hideous threat?" she said.

"I mean to marry you. That is enough for me."

"Do not so desecrate your priestly office, Father Sala. I do not wish to marry him. Surely you will not be a party to this business."

"You are angry now," said the priest. "And you are foolish. I am under the orders of Captain Vesey."

Conrad seized her hand. "Go on with the ceremony, priest."

In that desperate moment, she snatched a knife from his belt and struck at him. But Heaven preserved her from that crime. The point of the weapon struck the hilt of his breast-knife and glanced off. Before she could repeat

the blow he had her in his arms, pinioning her hands to her sides.

"Now, Sala. Go on. I will hold her."

She was crying out in frantic accents for mercy, when the rattle of rifles in the valley below broke upon their ears. It was followed by another volley, and then succeeded the sound of a general combat. Conrad released the girl and darted from the room. In a moment he was in the saddle and dashing down the path. As he came into the open plain he comprehended all. The "Trapping Brigade" had been met by Ben Miffin and was now engaged in combat with his men. He saw that his bandits were beaten and flying in every direction, and that Dan, Miffin, Jan, and three other horsemen had separated themselves from the rest and were coming down toward him at a gallop. He turned back, and reached the spot where Marian stood.

"Run for your life, Sala. Up the mountain. You know the passes well. The 'Trapping Brigade' has come and my men are scattered to the four winds."

He leaped from the saddle and caught Marian in his arms. She struggled, but she was powerless in his grasp. Just as he began the ascent, the three friends came into the pass and saw him. Leaping from their saddles, they gave chase. None of them dared to fire, for fear they might injure Maid Marian. Ben did not run so fast as the others and kept his rifle ready. The pursued reached a place so steep that he was forced to put Marian up first. Before he had taken a step to follow, a rifle cracked. Conrad Vesey threw up his hands, and uttering a terrible cry, fell into the canyon by the side of which he had pursued his flight. The stream below received his body, and bore it away.

"I told him so," muttered Ben. "His bullet was run long ago, an' now he's got it."

They found Marian panting on the rock above. Dan lifted her tenderly and carried her down to the camp. The combat in the valley was over and the Prairie Rangers existed only in name. The Trapping Brigade had fully revenged the slaughter of many an innocent.

They released Jeff Rooter and Indian Joe, who had been placed upon mules, though wounded. They were well cared for. In a few days Dan set out on his return. It is always easy, in a trapping brigade, to find members who are sick of the life before it is fairly commenced, and seven men besides Jan and Ben rode back with them to the forts, upon the promise of a large sum of money from Dan. Jeff Rooter received payment for what he had done, and remained with the brigade. Jan did the same.

Black Hills Ben went on to St. Louis. Dan waited long enough to have a suitable outfit made for Marian, and they were married. He had no one to interfere in his choice of a wife. A few friends were witnesses of the bridal. Ben stood near the door nudging Jan from time to time, to ask if "Maid Marian wa'n't a stunner." And Jan would answer, "Yaw."

In a day or two the hunters wearied of the city, and with a general good-by to their friends went back to the Black Hills.

THE END.

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